

Becoming a Councillor

A GUIDE FOR THE NEW 'COUNCIL MEMBER

**Second
Edition**



Roland Freeman

THE COUNCILLOR'S WORK . . .

Edited by Barry Rose

'Agents could confidently recommend this book to those who are learning about the work of Local Government . . . a most handy reference book for those who wish to find out the legal position of any particular aspect of Local Government.'

Conservative Agents' Journal

THE NEW BATTLE OF BRITAIN

A conservation handbook and directory

H. F. Wallis

'... it is very comprehensive. Compact and sensible, it ought to become the councillor's handbook to the care of the British environment.'

Municipal Journal

THE NEW CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING

Town and Country Planning Association

Will be welcomed as a concise and lucid account of the principles and practice of planning in Britain. It contains a full discussion of the human aspects of planning, and the mechanics of the process, followed by chapters on urban and rural planning. There is then a section on legal controls. A valuable set of appendices includes a glossary of planning terms, and lists of relevant legislation, national institutions and other bodies concerned with planning.

Charles Knight & Company Limited

A Member of the Benn group

25 NEW STREET SQUARE, LONDON, EC4A 3JA
& SOVEREIGN WAY, TONBRIDGE, KENT, TN9 1RW

Becoming a Councillor

SECOND EDITION

ROLAND FREEMAN

'An invaluable guide to anyone who wants to be a councillor' was how *Liberal News* described the first edition of *Becoming a Councillor*. This second edition continues the good work, and in addition takes account of the reorganisational changes which the council member should be familiar with.

Elected council members have always relied on the professional officers of a council for help and advice on specialist matters. Effective liaison, persuasion and political expertise, however, have always had to be learnt the hard way, through experience, and this is the great strength of Roland Freeman's book, which remains essential reading for anyone elected as a representative in local government today who wishes to serve the community in the most effective manner possible.

'Here at last is a book for councillors written by an ex-councillor . . . there are some good stories told which help to keep the whole thing in perspective.' *Municipal Review*

'... full of expert, friendly advice on how a councillor can play his part as a policy-maker.' *The Times*

Roland Freeman entered local government as a Councillor for the Metropolitan Borough of Wandsworth in 1949 and was at that time the youngest Councillor in Great Britain. He introduced six annual budgets for the Council and in 1961 became its leader. His work as a councillor continued over the period of reorganisation of London's government, and after service on various committees he was elected Chairman of the GLC Finance Committee in 1968. He has gained additional knowledge of local government from his membership of committees of local authority associations, and has lectured, written and broadcast a great deal on local government affairs. He is now a Justice of the Peace and sits in magistrates' courts in Inner London.

Printed in Great Britain

ISBN 0 85314-242-4

35MP1074

£2.00 net
UK ONLY

Becoming a Councillor

A GUIDE FOR THE NEW COUNCIL MEMBER

ROLAND FREEMAN

SECOND EDITION

CHARLES KNIGHT & COMPANY LIMITED
LONDON & TONBRIDGE

First published 1970
Charles Knight & Company Limited
25 New Street Square, London EC4A 3JA
& Sovereign Way, Tonbridge, Kent TN9 1RW
A Member of the Benn Group

Second edition 1975

Distributed in Canada by
The General Publishing Company Limited
Toronto

© Roland Freeman 1975

Printed in Great Britain

ISBN 0 85314-242-4

Printed by Tonbridge Printers Ltd, Peach Hall Works, Tonbridge, Kent

Preface

THE OBJECT OF THIS BOOK is to be helpful to the new Councillor. It is not a treatise on local government, but a guide book designed to suggest ways of acquiring the technique of government more quickly than by trial and error and to point out some of the pitfalls.

Of course, the book is an expression of opinion. Almost everything in it could be argued about by people with experience in local affairs. It would hardly have been possible, and certainly not helpful, to have written it without taking a postively personal view on the matters which daily confront a Councillor.

My experience was gained in London local government, both at borough and GLC level, and although I have discussed local government affairs with hundreds of county, district and parish Councillors I was never a member of a rural authority. However, in the new reorganised system few councils today are exclusively rural in character.

Reform of local government has inevitably produced larger units. All Councillors now find themselves handling the affairs of great organisations employing tens of thousands of staff and governing millions of people. Anyone entering local government today must look ahead and think big. I hope this book will be useful to him, and may stimulate some ideas among the older hands.

Contents

	Preface	5
1	From Candidate to Councillor	9
2	Relations with the Officers	26
3	Relations with the Press	45
4	Party Politics in Local Government	63
5	In Council and Committee	76
6	In the Constituency	94
7	Paying for it all	105
8	Organisations for Councillors	124
	Index	133

1. From Candidate to Councillor

BECOMING A COUNCILLOR MEANS taking part in the government of the country, helping to run a business, acting as a personal advisory service and generally learning the political trade.

Most people find it more exciting and exacting than they expected. The popular image of local government is not an attractive one and probably never will be. Bureaucracies by their very nature are objects of criticism in a lively democracy. Officials are obliged by the system to work anonymously and can easily be regarded as 'faceless' bureaucrats by the outsider. The municipal buildings, which help to form the public picture of local administration, are often portentous Victorian relics, cold and uninviting to the man-in-the-street. Where contemporary architecture has succeeded the old, the massive concrete and glass is seldom more welcoming than what it replaced.

As for the Councillors themselves, they still sometimes present an obvious target for the citizen who wishes to scoff at self-important local magnates. The balance between civic dignity and personal pomposity is precarious and easily upset.

If all this is seen in the context of the much publicised apathy at local elections, it is perhaps surprising that, every year, so many keen people come forward to take up time-consuming and unpopular duties. But they do. Fortunately

the desire to get things done and to play a part, however small, in shaping the environment is as strong as ever. Mixed with a little wholesome political ambition it always secures new recruits willing to tackle the problems and hoping to leave their personal mark on the life of the community.

Will they achieve even these modest objectives? Or will disillusion set in after the first few months in power?

There are so many obstacles in the way of getting anything done at all in a democratic system that early despair might seem a likely reaction among newcomers to the field. No sooner have they begun to ride their favourite hobby horses than forbidding legal difficulties will suddenly present themselves.

Local government lawyers have the duty of telling the new member when his bright ideas are, unfortunately, not quite within the powers of the Council. It has a rather deadening effect on early enthusiasms. Older Councillors too are quick to offer the discouraging information that a fledgeling colleague's novel proposal has been thoroughly studied already, indeed time after time, and—of course—found to be unworkable or ruinously expensive.

Newcomers to local government may also find the problems of decision-making, the relations with senior officers from a wide range of professions and the contact with press and public somewhat bewildering at first. The practice and traditions of government, whether local or national, are different from those of business and professional life in several essential respects. As we shall see later when discussing a Councillor's relations with the officers, it is a new world altogether precisely because of its democratic and representative character, unlike business, which tends to be authoritarian and competitive.

There is no point in measuring the typical local authority's committee system against one's experience of business or

professional decision-making because the circumstances and the objectives are not the same.

The Councillor approaching his new responsibility at the beginning of a public career in local government needs to keep an open mind. There is no necessary conflict between this outlook and the aggressive pursuit of grass roots politics. My observation of those who enter the town hall for the first time with a suspicious and truculent attitude to the system shows that, if they are intelligent enough to see the method behind its apparent madness, all will be well. But if not they seldom make effective members of the council.

Willingness to learn a great deal in a very short time is the first requirement of the new member. Becoming familiar with the elaborate methods and procedures of a democratic organisation will take time and the purpose of these chapters is to try and make these initial experiences less baffling and perhaps more rewarding to the new Councillor.

His very newness is itself an important asset. For without the fresh look at a council's policies and programmes which each intake brings to it after the local elections the system would soon decay and fossilise.

The Decision to Stand

It is worth emphasising at the outset that the decision to stand for election is not to be taken too lightly. I am certain that hundreds of people enter local government as elected members each year without having seriously considered the implications of becoming a Councillor. Many retire from municipal life at the first opportunity, either because they feel frustrated by the system or for reasons connected with their business life. Others take to it, and remain involved for many years often becoming highly influential and respected leaders of the community.

Why then, is the decision to stand sometimes taken so casually? Probably the main reason is the enormous pressure exerted on individuals by local party organisations who want to complete their lists of candidates and have difficulty in finding candidates for 'impossible' wards. Politics, however, can spring some unpleasant surprises.

It is all too common for people who never expected to win—and indeed actually calculated on not winning—to find themselves nervously signing, at the conclusion of the Count, the declaration of acceptance of office as a councillor. More than once I have seen people horrified at an unsought victory at the polls. They put a brave face on it for the benefit of their overjoyed supporters, but secretly wonder what their employer may say the next morning. Instances of this kind occur particularly after a landslide in public opinion.

An unforeseen electoral triumph can be a serious matter for new members of large authorities where attendance is required during the daytime. After one GLC election, for example, a new member, an engineer, was promptly sacked by his firm. Public spirit is something to which lip-service is always paid and one might have expected a company's Board to be more understanding. But it is asking a lot of an employer to lose the services of a key executive for two or three afternoons every week.

A story is also told—I cannot personally vouch for it—that at the same election one candidate was so astounded to discover that he had been narrowly elected that he collared his election agent and told him to call for a recount!

In 1970 the GLC, which by reason of its size is perhaps the extreme case, lost over a quarter of its members through personal decisions not to stand again for a further three years. Not all those who gave up after one term, just when their service to the Council was becoming most valuable, did so because they had not anticipated winning a seat in the first

place. Many found that the clash of interest between local government on that formidable scale and the business of earning a living could not be resolved. While local government remains a voluntary pursuit, one's livelihood is bound to come first when choices of this kind have to be made.

Even if the difficulty is less severe in smaller cities and counties the demands on time are constantly growing. Now that Councils have increased in size the member will gradually find that his work extends beyond the two or three evenings a week which he might originally have contemplated. That is when the hard decision to give up has to be taken and local government generally is the loser. Until arrangements for reimbursing Councillors are reformed, it will be wise for anyone under pressure to contest a local election to think twice before plunging into the fray. At the very least he should take advice from active (not lazy) Councillors and ask precisely what the commitments really are.

Vague replies indicating about two or three meetings a week are unlikely to be a good guide in themselves. What of the other activities which go with a Councillor's job? How many ward meetings will become obligatory once he has become a public representative, and especially if he is a party member with political functions to think about? How much constituency case work is he likely to be involved in? And above all, what is the average flow of paper work which has to be mastered week after week? In the days when the old London County Council was the largest local authority in Britain one of the members of the Opposition party got widespread press coverage by collecting all the documents he had had to read in one month and getting his picture taken sitting behind the pile of paper. It stood well over two feet high.

If the prospective Councillor has made a careful assessment

of the likely claims on his time and knows that he can meet them, with a margin for the unexpected, he is not likely to be among those who serve only one term and depart with undisguised relief at putting down their public burdens.

The Councillor's Role

We shall discuss in this book the main practical problems confronting a Councillor, but at the outset he should be clear what his job really involves. Is he there, as some will argue, solely to decide policy and leave the administration to the officers? Or should he take a close interest in how policy is carried out?

Drawing a sharp distinction like this between policy and administration is not sensible. In practice, it seldom works out as simply as that. How is a Councillor to decide a policy for Council rents unless he studies the detailed financial effect of various alternatives? What are, for example, the real choices between rents based on historic cost, or replacement cost, or rateable values, or 'fair' rent values?

Each possibility has its pros and cons. One may be more suitable to a particular Council (depending on its existing stock of houses) than to another. Clearly a new member of a Housing Committee would be all at sea on this subject if he has not taken the trouble to master the relevant facts and arguments. It is no good talking grandly about 'not subsidising people who can afford economic rents'. What are 'economic' rents anyway? Several convincing, but different, answers could be given to that one.

It will be apparent from this example alone that the traditional view of the role of the elected member as a representative of the people chosen to exercise broad control over the bureaucratic machine is a large over-simplification. While the foundation of a Councillor's authority lies in the

right of the taxpayer (or, to be precise in local government terms, the ratepayer) to select his own representatives to levy the taxes, the growing scale and complexity of the public services requires a much deeper involvement in the administrative process than merely authorising the expenditure of public money.

I wonder incidentally if, all those years ago, the people who raised the historic cry 'no taxation without representation' could ever have realised that more representation has always led to more taxation!

The new Councillor will find that if he plays his part effectively in modern local government he will be deliberating on policy, decision-making over a broad range of public services, scrutinising the expenditure of money, fighting for local rights and liberties against the endless encroachments attempted by Whitehall and communicating between the executive arm of local government and the customer who elected him.

Policy, therefore, is not simply a convenient word to describe broad decisions on general lines with everything else left to the professional administrators to settle. To be effective as a decision-maker, the Councillor must have a grasp of detail. This will be acquired by experience in committee work itself, but the process can be hastened by diligent reading of committee papers and other relevant material in the early months after a new member's election.

The way the Councillor conducts his activities is also bound up with his relations with the officers and this field is explored more fully in Chapter 2. But he must recognise from the day he agrees to stand for election that a Councillor has a good deal more to do than merely bringing local knowledge and commonsense to bear on what may have seemed from the outside, relatively straightforward matters.

Coping with Paper Work

For candidates seeking membership of one of the larger authorities a course on quick reading is a sound investment. The merciless flow of paper work, on which all committees feed, is otherwise likely to daunt those members who have little previous experience of coping with it.

It is easy to spot those Councillors who give up the reading effort soon after their election. Their agendas and reports are brought to the Committee meeting in almost pristine condition. They have not read the documents and will then proceed to ask questions which were carefully dealt with in the officers' reports.

The art of intelligent skipping of documents can be invaluable, but unless the reading obligations are shouldered conscientiously from the outset a Councillor will seldom influence the decision-making process at all. He may be listened to politely, especially by the officers, but his observations will carry little weight if they are not well informed. Other members who have burnt the midnight oil reading their documents are naturally impatient with anyone who wastes time with unnecessary questions.

Early Briefing

A wise candidate will go to some trouble to brief himself on the work of the Council before beginning his local election campaign. He need not plough through the standard works on local government to be found in the local library. They are primarily aimed at the student preparing for professional examinations and much of the material will be irrelevant either to the candidate or the Councillor.

A short paperback account of the local government system can be looked through to get a broad picture of local authorities and their respective functions. Only the chapters

on the particular kind of council for which he is a candidate should be read carefully and learnt. The general principles of local government finance, especially the rating system, are also important to all new Councillors and are summarised in Chapter 7.

This preliminary background reading should give the newcomer to local government a useful outline of the system, so that he understands where his own Council's work fits in with the rest. In 'metropolitan' areas for example the two-tier structure differs from its counterpart (the County Council and District Council system) elsewhere while Greater London has historically a separate arrangement altogether. It is vitally important to learn at the outset not only what the powers of a particular council are but where these are shared or overlap with the other authority. Many new councillors in the first year of the reorganised system will have come from areas previously, for over a century, run as a single unit of government (the old County Boroughs) and the problems peculiar to the two-tier structure will be especially unfamiliar to them.

The quickest way for a candidate to acquire an acquaintance with the Council's business is to attend its meetings. Curiously enough very few intending candidates bother to take such an obvious step. Public galleries are sparsely attended as a rule, except when a local controversy is raging, because the procedures of Council meetings tend to be dull and are often obscure to the uninitiated outsider. But the successful candidate will have to master these matters anyway and the sooner he starts going along regularly to meetings and getting the 'feel' of the place the better.

First he should write to the Public Relations Department and ask to be put on the mailing list for the Council Agenda and Minutes and any other documents normally supplied to the public on request. Some Councils make a small charge for this, but the local library will always have copies too. Agendas

vary widely in style from one Council to another. Some are written in impossible officialese and require monumental patience and perseverance from the reader. Others will give a fair and even readable picture of the decisions taken by Committees, and which are being recommended to the full Council.

In this way the future member can build up a useful background knowledge of current issues at the Town Hall. He is then much less likely to be caught out by a doorstep question on what the Council is doing about some local problem of the moment. It is poor campaigning to have to fall back on the old plea 'I'm not yet *on* the Council you see, madam, but I'll look into it when I get there'.

I remember one candidate at a public meeting who devoted his whole speech to telling his audience how important local government was and, regrettably, how apathetic the public remained about it and generally how ignorant people were on the subject. He was neatly floored by the very first question: 'Has the candidate ever been to a meeting of our Borough Council?' He had not.

The local newspapers are another good source of material for the candidate. Anyone keen enough to volunteer for Council work presumably reads them thoroughly for news of the Council. He will look out for complaints about its services by letter writers or local organisations.

The editorial columns will often provide valuable material too and although a newspaper's comment is, of course, usually the opinion of the leader writer or of the daily editorial conference, it will probably influence opinion—whether for good or ill. Some local journalists acquire over the years a deep acquaintance with council affairs equal to that of many long-serving Councillors. In my early days as a Borough Councillor I recall a special tribute paid by the Mayor to a local editor on the occasion of his 40th year in the Press

Gallery having never missed one meeting! More typically, however, Council affairs are still often left to the junior 'cub' reporters but good relations with these younger reporters should be developed. Many of them will rapidly become influential journalists and having friends in this field never does any harm!

Appointing Committees

Once the Councillor has been duly elected and made his customary promise faithfully to represent all his constituents—whether they voted for him or not—he is faced with some important and immediate decisions.

Appointments to committees, through which most of the real work is done, are handled according to the custom prevailing in each Council. Those which are highly organised on party lines, mostly London and the big city corporations, make the appointments through the party whips. A pre-arranged ratio of places between majority and minority parties will have been settled and there will often be insufficient vacancies to satisfy the demand where the most prominent and prestigious committees are concerned.

Obviously, the experienced members will tend to get preference on the major Committees of the Council, especially those dealing with Policy and Resources and Strategic Planning or Committees controlling particular services such as Education, Housing and Environmental Planning. Nevertheless, it is usually a good plan to apply for one of the larger Committees (especially if one has professional or business experience relevant to it), and for two or three smaller Committees. Each year or so one should, if possible, change some Committees so as to build up a picture of the Council's work as a whole.

Most Councils permit members to attend (and sometimes

even to speak at) Committees of which they are not members although this may be by invitation only. During my first year on a Borough Council I attended almost every Committee meeting observing how the business was conducted, assessing the Chairmen and picking up much useful information on how to be effective as a back bench member. It was perhaps an excessively zealous programme, but new members who can find time in their first year to listen to other committees in session will not regret the hours spent.

Mayors, Chairmen and Leaders

One of the most awkward problems for a new Councillor may be the imminent choice of the next Mayor or Chairman of the Council. Assuming his party is in a majority, and custom has it that the Mayor or Chairman is appointed by the party in power, there may well have been some private—even publicly announced or leaked—deal by which the succession to the Chair is, for all practical purposes, already settled. In the days when a number of members were elected by Councillors to sit as Aldermen it was always possible to guarantee that the future Mayor could still be a member even if he lost his seat in the election. (Indeed, strictly speaking, a Mayor can be elected from outside the ranks of the Council and becomes a member for his year of office only. This is usually done in break-even situations to enable one party to keep its majority in the Council.)

Now that Aldermen are being abolished (except in the City of London where they are directly elected anyway) it does not follow that the Mayor-elect will necessarily be there to assume the Chair or that his party will be in a position to put him there if they have lost their majority. So last-minute choices sometimes have to be made, and given the much

larger areas of the post-1974 reorganised local government many Councillors will not know all their new colleagues personally, however long they may have served at the Town Hall.

The traditional practice of applying a strict seniority rule, i.e. length of service on the Council, will probably survive the reorganisation upheaval and in some respects it has much to be said for it. There is less chance of an undignified fight for what is to many Councillors a coveted position and an undoubted honour.

On the other hand, the Mayor or Chairman carries the chief responsibility for representing the Council in the public affairs of the town or county and his ceremonial duties are now, with fewer but larger districts, more extensive than ever. Some people are naturally at home in this role—often those who enjoy the party politicking the least make the best Mayors in the social round of the office—while others, senior or not, are obviously unsuitable. It may seem hard to deny a long serving Councillor the position of Mayor to which he probably feels entitled, but it is useless to complain about the image of local government if one is not prepared firmly to reject as the titular head of the Council a member who is manifestly going to be an embarrassment.

Still more important these days is the difficult 'political' role in which the occupier of the Chair now increasingly finds himself. Although all Mayors and Chairmen are, I think almost invariably, expected to be impeccably impartial during their term of office, this delicate task is easier said than done. Not only must the active and spirited political campaigner of yesterday suddenly don a benign and judicial air to all sides of the debating chamber, but he should also be reasonably adept at Chairmanship itself. Really good Chairmen are a rarer species among politicians than is commonly supposed, but most of us can get by even in trying circumstances. The

Councillor, however, who has no abilities in this direction ought, in the general interests of both the Council and local government, to be passed over.

In short, I take the hard view that local government is too important, too powerful, too serious an activity in any town or county, to be headed, even nominally and for only one year at a time, by someone who is either unsuitable in the social and ceremonial role of first citizen or incapable of successfully conducting in public the business of an elected assembly of Councillors.

The new Councillor may not agree with my approach to this problem (older Councillors are usually positively averse to it), but he should bear it in mind at the outset and not be rail-roaded by the party whips or senior colleagues into accepting without demur any appointment of which he instinctively disapproves. Whips, of course, habitually believe in newcomers being 'seen and not heard'; but that is a maxim suitable only for the child in politics.

The distinction between the Chairman of a Council (or the Mayor of a Borough) and its Leader still causes much confusion. Even in London where the idea of the Council Leader is most deeply entrenched, newspapers constantly muddle the two terms.

It was in the nineteen-thirties, when Herbert Morrison ran the old LCC, that the Leadership became a really significant and established position although it had of course existed in practice long before that. The official and ceremonial head of a Council is always either the Mayor or Chairman and if the former title carries with it a stronger aroma of tradition and pageantry the function is not markedly different from that of a District or a County Council Chairman.

The Mayor is of course the first citizen of the town whereas in Counties that honour belongs to the Lord Lieutenant, but these are matters of protocol rather than of power. Indeed,

in local government terms, the Mayor or Chairman combines the role of the Queen and the Speaker of the House of Commons!

The Leader of the Council on the other hand is the equivalent of the Prime Minister. He is the chosen leader of the majority party on the Council and in practice the head of the administration at member level. Many Council Leaders owe their status to common acceptance of the position by the Council even though nothing appears in Standing Orders. This can work perfectly well. After all the Prime Minister himself is still officially the First Lord of the Treasury and it does not matter too much what the technical arrangements are as long as everyone acknowledges the fact of the Leadership.

When I became Leader of a Borough Council, however, I had the LCC rules copied and so established the Leadership, and that of Leader of the Opposition, beyond any doubt in the Standing Orders of the Council. This also had the advantage of enabling the Opposition—or indeed any member of the Council—to put questions down for me to answer at the Council Meetings in my capacity as Leader and not merely as a Committee Chairman.

Questions of this kind, like those put to the Premier in the House of Commons, tend to be on general policy issues rather than matters within the specific responsibility of a Committee Chairman. Now that overall Policy Committees are becoming customary in modern Council Committee structures, the Chairman of this Committee will in any case be the Leader so this formalisation of the Leadership is not perhaps so necessary. I still think, from a purely public relations point of view, that clarity in identifying the positions of power and those of ceremonial is valuable. The title Leader of the Council is becoming almost universal among the very large authorities and it is better that the holder of the office

should be recognisable as such and open to public scrutiny and comment.

Whether the growing predominance of a single powerful figure on each Council is a happy development is perhaps still too early to judge. It is not the equivalent of American directly elected and salaried City Managers or Mayors but may be moving slowly towards that concept of public administration. I do, however, doubt the wisdom of Leaders who take the chief part in many ceremonial functions such as opening new Council housing, road or school projects and the like. These seem to me to be properly the role of the Mayor or Chairman.

Fundamentally there is good reason to keep the formal, dignified ceremonial activities of a public body separate from the wielding of political power. The one is essentially permanent and impartial, the other transient and tendentious. As a cardinal matter of principle they ought not to be combined in one personality, however small the authority or slight the apparent threat to liberty.

Having taken his seat on the Council, helped to elect the Mayor or Chairmen for the forthcoming year and at a private meeting confirmed the position of his Party Leader, the new Councillor will be ready to embark on his first four year term of office.

He should bear one general legal point always in mind. I have already mentioned the disheartening experience of many keen newcomers to local government who find cold water poured on their best ideas because the law of the land does not permit the Council to adopt them. The principle behind this is an important one and differs from practice in some other countries.

There are broadly two ways of providing a legal framework for local government.

Under the first, Parliament has to give specific legal sanc-

tion for powers exercised by a local authority and it does this through Acts of Parliament, or regulations made under them. The Courts interpret the statute law in the ordinary way and judge-made decisions are part of this legal framework. In effect no Council can exercise any power without pointing to some authority in law for doing so. If it acts without such authority the expenditure may be held as '*ultra vires*', i.e., outside the power of the Council. In these circumstances the Councillors themselves may be personally surcharged with the money improperly spent. In practice, however, the officers ensure that such errors are hardly ever made, and Councillors may be comforted by the knowledge that the Minister has power to grant relief from surcharge.

The alternative arrangement is for Councils to be granted by Parliament a general competence to do all such things as they consider to be in the interest of their community but which are not contrary to the law. This is one of the proposals of the Royal Commission on the Reform of Local Government (the Maud Report) and is already to a small extent provided for all Councils up to a prescribed rate poundage limit.

The essential difference between the two arrangements is that under the former, which is the current British system every extension of local government powers requires legislation through Parliament. Under the Maud proposals, however, this would be unnecessary, but Parliament would still be able to bring in Bills to stop Councils doing something of which is disapproved. Such a momentous change in the relations between Central and Local Government is probably not likely to occur for many years so the new Councillor will have to remember that, if a development which he is enthusiastic about requires new legislative authority, this may take a very long time indeed.

2. Relations with the Officers

PROBABLY THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR in a member's ability to influence the work of the Council is his relationship with the officers. Whatever arguments there may be about the dividing line between policy and administrative decision-making, the officer's job is to carry out those decisions. He has the executive responsibility for doing the work and the Councillor has no right to try and do it for him.

On the other hand the way administrative work is done is very properly the concern of a wide-awake Councillor. He should never hesitate to look into criticisms of local services or complaints from the public about the treatment they receive and to follow up cases when, *prima facie*, action seems justified.

This aspect of the relationship is a delicate one and requires understanding on both sides. The administrative, professional and technical staff of the Council naturally resent attempts by the individual lay member to tell them how their job should be done.

Local authority staff are employed by the Council as such and must abide by the decision of the Council or its committees acting under authority delegated to them. This arrangement differs from that of the Civil Service where, as their employment is under the Crown, their allegiance lies to it and not to Parliament.

It is always possible for a Councillor who happens to enjoy considerable personal power in the council to dictate to officers and I have seen this practice pushed to remarkable extremes. Other members ought not, in their own interests, to permit such habits to develop unless they are part of an established procedure (such as the GLC's 'Chairman's Action' discussed later in this Chapter) which contain adequate democratic safeguards.

A particular difficulty may arise when a member happens to have technical or professional knowledge in one of the areas covered by local government administration. It is tempting for such a member to use his elected position to tell an officer or a department how to deal with something which is executive rather than policy in character. Nevertheless, these instincts should be resisted. The member himself is not responsible for the daily execution of business. Officers are. They are employed precisely in order to be so.

The member's interest in a case may be, and often is, temporary in character and isolated from hundreds of similar cases. It will possibly be the result of some individual agitation or pressure from a constituent. The officers see the administrative machine functioning as a continuing process and must try to pursue a consistent course in dealing with the public. The famous 'red tape' which we frequently read about is infuriating if one is subject to it. But it is in theory at least the product of a desire to give equal treatment to everyone and avoid favouritism at all costs.

A member's professional or business knowledge and experience may not be quite as germane as he thinks to the specialised field of local government administration. A common argument of new Councillors is that they intend to see local government run, 'as I have to run my business'. It goes down well at ratepayers' meetings, and, frankly, is very wide of the mark.

Most small businesses are dictatorships. The decision-making process is often in the hands of one man or perhaps at most two or three people. Control is provided by competition and the profit motive. Even in big businesses there is no democratic assembly of shareholders with large policy-making powers and regular public meetings supervising the conduct of the business. The Board carries out its work in private without intervention from shareholders.

The local official, however, although he is not competing against a rival firm or motivated by desire for profit or fear of loss and bankruptcy, is required to work under an elaborate system of democratic checks and controls. The Councillors themselves are the principal instrument of control because publicly raised money is being spent.

So the whole machine inevitably moves slowly, and, by comparison with business life, seems overloaded with staff and more prone to over-expenditure where direct comparisons can be made. The truth is that cumbersome administration is part of the price we pay for democracy.

New members should recognise the special circumstances of the public administrator's job and, if their own experience is in business, avoid the superficial assumption that the one is strictly comparable to the other.

Of course there is much valuable know-how in both fields, particularly among the bigger units, which is relevant to both industry and public administration. As more Councils have been amalgamated and semi-regional authorities like the GLC have emerged, greater similarities are developing between large industrial companies and local government. The big business corporation is already in important respects akin to the large local authority, particularly in its administrative structure.

The growth of management techniques in local government has followed their development in industry. Executives

familiar with them and who become Council members, will usually want to take a special interest in organisational and methods problems. All the same, it is still essential to preserve a distinction between the two kinds of corporation, private and public, and between the role of the Councillor and that of the company director.

The 'Bains' Report

While a busy Councillor, especially one faced for the first time with unfamiliar agendas, reports and correspondence as well as a rash of committee and sub-committee meetings to attend, has little time left over to read many books about local government, there is one exception which is worth whatever time can be spent on it. The 'Bains Report', properly entitled 'The New Local Authorities: Management and Structure' is a challenging work, controversial in many respects and, unlike official reports in general, it is readable as well. No thoughtful Councillor who takes his role as an elected member seriously should fail to study it. I quote just four paragraphs from Chapter 3, 'The Role of Elected members and Officers' :

The Maud Committee exploded the myth of policy being a matter for the elected members and administration for officers and it is disturbing to find, five years later, that many members and officers still see this as a sufficient description of their respective roles and one behind which they can shelter as occasion requires. It is perhaps even more disturbing to see how a rigid interpretation of the role of one or the other defeats any attempt to create a sense of unity of purpose within an authority.

We believe that if local government is to have any chance of achieving a corporate approach to its affairs members and officers must both recognise that neither can regard

any area of the authority's work and administration as exclusively theirs.

Officers must accept that members have a legitimate interest in the day to day administration of cases involving their constituents and that it is frequently only a lack of information which causes them to pursue such matters into the administrative machine.

Members must equally realise that the skilled professional officer is not just a servant who is paid to do as he is told. We do not dispute that the major policy decisions must be taken by the elected members, but the officers have a role to play in the stimulation and formulation of policy and in seeing that the members have available the necessary advice and evaluation to enable them to make the best decisions.

Councillor's Right to Information

A practical point, which occurs from time to time, is the Councillor's legal right to information on the Council's affairs. Where a specific document is requested, production of it by an officer cannot be refused. But a Councillor has no right to a 'roving commission' through the files of the Council.

The first practice is a sensible safeguard for the public and protects the member's right to information on any specific subject or document which he needs in carrying out his work. The second would constitute an intolerable interference with the daily work of the officials and they are, very reasonably, protected from it by the Courts.

Similarly, a member has no special right to make uninvited visits to Council premises not open in the ordinary way to the public. I have known instances where a member wanted to look round depots to see whether the staff were

working or not! This is a management function, not a Councillor's job.

If Councillors have seen that the management structure is right, by appointing first-class chief and senior officers, they must not then collectively or individually step in and try to do the work for them. The friction caused by misunderstanding the officer's function, however well-intentioned, can be serious and is damaging to good administration.

Deciding Policy

So far this discussion has been about the executive side of officers' work. The Councillor's role is to determine policy and check the results of its implementation. But the officers also play a large part in advising the member on policy decisions and this is where the relationship between the two becomes most important and delicate. It is a boundary line imprecisely drawn and subject to habit, tradition, personality and commonsense, rather than a set of rules or standing orders.

Normal practice is for officers to give Committee members a written report showing briefly the relevant history of a project, the nature of the current problem or decision and either a definite recommendation or a set of alternatives for the Committee to choose.

Most decisions are taken on recommendations from officers, but the most difficult issues, especially those with party political overtones, are more frequently presented with the alternative courses of action and a summing up of the pros and cons. On the GLC this is customarily concluded with the words: 'Will the Committee please decide'.

The new member must not be too innocent in these matters and imagine that the officers have no strong view on the

alternatives before him. Or that their advice has only been offered to members in the terms of the report.

Most Committee chairmen are in close touch with the senior officers in their respective department and the officers' view may well have been put strongly to the Chairman in private before the Committee meets. In large Councils a procedure by which the Chairman and his Vice-Chairman go through the Committee agenda and reports with the officers before the meeting is well established. On the GLC it is known as a 'call-over'.

Chairman's Action

The Committee Chairman in the larger authorities is not merely a Committee member who takes the chair at the meetings. He may have to take many policy decisions personally between Committee meetings. At the GLC these decisions are known officially as 'Chairman's Action' and, even though the main Committees meet fortnightly, more individual reports will be dispatched by the Chairman alone than by the Committee.

These reports are in the same form as those which go before a full Committee. Once the Chairman has, after considering them, taken a decision and signed his approval (possibly subject to some amendments), or has referred a paper back for further discussion, the Committee itself is deemed to have taken the decision.

When the full Committee meets later all these decisions are briefly reported to it for information or just 'laid on the table', but the powers of the Chairman to take action in this way are vested in him by the Standing Orders and cannot be taken away by the Committee. As an additional safeguard a member of the Opposition party is always shown all the documents before the next Committee meeting. In

practice Chairman's Action is the only way a large number of relatively non-controversial decisions can be taken on a large authority without swamping the Committees themselves. Without such delegation to Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen the GLC Committees would have to be in almost continuous session.

One of the snags in this procedure is how to decide which reports go to the Committee and which to the Chairman sitting by himself. Strictly speaking only the routine reports, generally involving relatively small sums of money, should be placed before Chairmen and the major issues, or those likely to involve controversy, should be reserved for the full Committee meeting. This will be initially the officer's decision, but a Chairman who feels that a matter is too important to be considered by him alone can refuse to take it. The report then has to go to the full Committee.

I shall always look back with affection at one of the last Chairman's Action reports to appear on my desk as GLC Finance Chairman. It described three rather old buildings where, it said, the means of escape in case of fire were outmoded, and, in the light of contemporary knowledge and bearing in mind the paramount need for public safety, etc. etc., they ought now to be brought fully up to date. I lost no time in signing this report. All three buildings were GLC Fire Stations.

A Chairman is likely to become better informed than other members on his Committee and much closer than they are to the officers. This does not mean that he is always right. No new member should accept a Chairman's line if he does not agree with it, just because it comes from the chair and sounds well-informed. A weak Chairman may be no more than a mouthpiece for the officers. They may want to get certain business through and if a Chairman is incapable of taking decisions or giving a firm lead to a Committee on

his own they may try to do it for him. I recall one chief officer saying desperately after a long private meeting with a new Chairman 'It's hopeless. I can't get a decision out of him at all. Not even a bad one!'

A strong Chairman on the other hand may be too dogmatic and allow his personal whims to influence good administrative practice. Only experience can guide a Councillor in these matters, but from the outset he should make a point of studying how different Chairmen handle their job.

He will also be forming views on the quality of the senior officers by observing how they assist a Committee in its work and in particular how they react to unexpected situations in Committee discussions. One revealing practice in this respect is the extent to which chief officers trust their deputies and other senior staff to speak for them in Committee.

The extreme case is the chief officer who will scarcely permit anyone other than his deputy to sit in on the Committee meeting, as though it were some sacrosanct gathering and attendance was a mark of status like the size of his desk or the quality of the office carpet.

The effect of such a restrictive view is almost wholly unfortunate. Officers who are quite senior in rank in their department do not know, except at secondhand, how members' minds are moving. Councillors may be fobbed off with a generalised answer to a detailed point because the chief officer cannot possibly be omniscient. The man dealing with the problem might well have been able to give the right information when it was required at the meeting.

This practice also points to an inability on the part of the chief officer to delegate. In any large organisation such a failing can be serious both for the members who get less than adequate advice and the staff whose morale suffers if they feel themselves to be working in the dark.

Early in my term as Chairman of a GLC Committee the principal chief officer with whom I was in contact most of the time emphasised to me that he could only know intimately a minimal part of the vast operations over which he presided. He expected and encouraged his assistants to take a full part in informing and advising the Committee on matters with which they were directly concerned and had specialist knowledge. This was the right approach. In some other departments it worked less successfully and I adopted the (not very popular) tactic of holding up Committee discussions until an officer could be found who knew in detail what he was talking about. If some-one could not be brought in quickly the whole matter was promptly postponed to the next meeting regardless of protestations about the dire effects of delay.

One does not, of course, tell a chief officer what arrangements he should make within his own department about informing and advising a Committee during its meetings. But if inadequate information—or plausible generalisations—are resolutely resisted the department will have to provide a better service in order to get the business through. So it comes to the same thing in the end.

Choosing Officers

It follows from all this that the selection of chief and senior officers is almost the most important personal decision which Councillors make. In the case of chief officer selection it will be largely unaided by advice except where the Council has a Chief Executive Officer to whom the heads of departments are responsible.

The business of selecting officers to fill vacancies or appointments to newly created posts is one of the least satisfactory aspects of local government. Practice varies

widely since each Council can adopt its own arrangements. On one authority I have seen the whole Council interview the final short-list of three applicants for Town Clerk. On another a small sub-committee did all the interviewing for a similar post and merely recommended its final choice to the General Purpose Committee and then to the Council.

The crux of the problem here is that management selection is itself a highly skilled process and not a suitable matter for large democratic assemblies to deal with. In industry the most efficient companies take care to get the right personnel either by carefully designed internal selection procedures or by using outside specialist firms.

Most Councillors will have no training or experience in selecting managers. Yet even the newest recruit may suddenly find himself spending a morning interviewing potential education inspectors, medical officers of health, architects, treasurers or indeed senior men from any of the professions associated with local services.

What are the considerations which should determine a decision? How can one judge between one set of effusive personal references and another? What is the job specification anyway? What, in short, is he supposed to be looking for?

In default of any real experience in these matters one has seen, all too often, a chance impression created during an interview determine the panel's decision. Or one has painfully watched someone who simply does not interview well labouring under this disability which is quite irrelevant to his real capacity as an administrator or professional adviser. It is a poor way of choosing officers whose influence in a town may be vital over many years.

Local government is not of course the only area where luck can play its capricious role in deciding appointments. Plenty of companies make staff selections on no better basis either. So what can be done about it?

First the new member should if possible decline invitations to involve him in selection or interviewing panels at an early stage in his local government work. Even if he has special knowledge of the management selection art, he will not know the scope of the Council's activities well enough to judge what is wanted for a particular post.

Since interviewing absorbs a great deal of time (and one really must hear all candidates or not vote at all) it is, regrettably, a none too popular task. The members most likely to be effective are already pretty busy. If, in a particular authority, the whole thing is considered rather a chore (and even something of an embarrassment) the new member can easily be press-ganged into carrying some of the burden. While the opportunity to help select officers may be presented in flattering terms, the request really ought not to be too readily accepted.

If it is right that the choice of the best staff is more important in the long run than most other administrative decisions a Council makes, then the responsibility must rest squarely with the leading members of the Council. They will not necessarily handle the process efficiently merely because they are experienced in the Council's work. Indeed, where an internal applicant is pitted against outsiders, it may be hard for veteran Councillors to keep a completely open mind. They will know the internal staff man well and probably have had a friendly relationship over many years. It is curiously not always easy to see the weaknesses in an officer if one has been close to him over a long period, whereas the outsider is an unknown quantity and may get a more critical assessment.

There is a lot to be said for devising some formal procedures for putting relevant points to interviewees. This would replace the common practice of going round the table and getting a mixed bag of questions ranging from the

shrewd one based on a careful study of the candidate's record to some charmingly irrelevant inquiry about his hobbies.

There is, of course, a cheerful assumption in local democracy, that if you get half a dozen reasonable people round a table and ask them to use their commonsense it will come out all right in the wash. I doubt if this is true nowadays, or even was, and some painstaking attention to well-tryed management selection practice ought to pay dividends.

Terminating an Appointment

The other side of the coin is the unpleasant problem involved in getting rid of an officer when a bad appointment has been made. In industry the termination of a manager's appointment is far less sensational than that of a public administrator. It is acknowledged as one of the risks of being in business life.

Already there are signs that, at least at the top level in local government, chief officers and certainly the new breed of Directors-General or Chief Executive Officers, might be under service contracts similar to those in industry. But for the foreseeable future most appointments in public administration are likely to have the same general understanding of security about them as they have always enjoyed. The financial rewards are not so great—although the differential is less than it once was—and security is still an important attraction for a job in public service.

What then happens when the performance of a Chief Officer is so unsatisfactory that he loses the confidence of the Council? Assuming that this deterioration in the relationship is not due to ill-health the Council must face up to the trying task of making a change. If an officer is close to

retirement the matter can sometimes be left to solve itself, although this may be tough on his deputy.

Alternatively I have known of departmental reorganisations (with a full-scale OM operation to boot) undertaken largely to eliminate a particular post and retire the current holder of it in particular. He gets a handsome redundancy payment which is the nearest thing to the industrial 'golden handshake' and everyone is happy except, perhaps in the short-term, the ratepayers who paid for it all.

Where none of these possibilities exists the unhappy solution of asking for a resignation must be grasped. Every reasonable step should always be taken, as a good employer of public servants must, to relieve hardship and ease the departure itself, self-respect being more important than cash in cases like these. One ought nevertheless not to allow sentiment to outweigh the public interest.

The ultimate duty of the Councillor is to those who elected him above everyone else. What if he assents to the maintenance in office of a senior official whose competence is in question and who no longer enjoys the confidence of the Council, but who retains the considerable personal power of such an office? He must be able in his own conscience to justify that situation as a representative of the public. Once he can no longer do so then the moment has come, in agreement with his colleagues, to take action however distasteful it may be.

All of which, rare though these instances are, underlines once again the crucial nature of the appointment of able senior officers in the first place.

I stress *senior* officers because in any sound administrative system these are the only appointments which should concern Councillors. Provided the heads of departments and their deputies and all other very senior positions where the Councillor will look for advice and guidance in his work are

appointed through selection committees, the posts lower down the scale can be safely delegated in the Chief Officers to deal with. It is part of their job to do this and the ability to choose staff and to provide first class leadership in a department is one of the key attributes one looks for in choosing the top men.

Having done so, it is foolish to try and appoint their staff for them. Most Councils are moving to much greater delegation in these matters, reserving the essential decisions for members rather than wasting their time on hours of unnecessary and rather amateurish interviewing of middle range staff.

I am introducing at this point a modestly philosophical note. The existence of a large body of professional administrators owing allegiance not to the Crown or the Government but to the local elected representatives in Council assembled, is a very real bulwark of freedom in a country like Britain with its powerful and highly centralised form of national administration. A bureaucracy of great professional expertise and administrative skill such as the Civil Service could be too dominant in a democracy where the only check against it was the spare-time local Councillor. The fact that he has at his side his own army of technocrats and bureaucrats is a balancing factor which should never be underestimated when considering how power is wielded in Britain. Democracy, far from being weakened by it, is protected by the existence of two rather than one bureaucracies.

I conclude this chapter with a story which is a classic of its kind in several crucial respects and which I have quoted frequently at public meetings in local government to illustrate the role of the elected member in his relationship with the officers. It occurred in 1967 shortly after I became Finance Chairman to the Inner London Education Authority. A report appeared one day on my desk which proposed final

arrangements for the ILEA's splendid new Educational Television Service. An old school, about to be closed, was to be converted as the TV headquarters and would be used until, eventually, as the service expanded, a purpose-built centre would take its place. Once this report had been approved the contract with the GPO for the necessary cable-laying would be signed. A great deal of preparatory work had been done and the opening of the service was programmed for the following Autumn. This was a tight schedule and the education officers naturally wanted a prompt decision.

Although a matter-of-fact document running to several pages with various proposals for relatively minor conversion works and related matters, it nevertheless contained one sentence which struck me as curious. The gist of this was that, as the Northern route of the proposed Motorway Box (now known as Ringway One) was planned to run next to the school, some extra expenditure on sound-proofing would be needed; but this passage went on to say that *the route had not been finally determined*. Knowing something of the problems of motorway alignment from a short experience on the GLC Traffic Committee I immediately pondered the possibility that, after the school had been converted into the ETV Centre and duly opened, the motorway line might be shifted so as to require its demolition.

Although assured by the officers that this was not likely, the fact remained that the paragraph in the report left the possibility open. If I had learnt anything in my previous work on a Borough Council it was to watch out for ambiguous phrases in reports. As in this case, they are not attempts to fudge an issue, still less to deceive. Quite often they signal some lack of co-ordination between departments or a protective instinct by one of the contributors to the report who is anxious to avoid too precise a commitment.

I called a meeting for the next morning of the GLC Road Engineers and the ILEA officers dealing with ETV. It at once became apparent that the motorway was definitely going to cut through the school site. There was no doubt among the engineers on that score. The only question was how soon the school would be needed for demolition. Engineers always tend to be optimistic and they thought the mid-seventies. The education officers were sceptical—rightly as it turned out. But the real question which the elected members present had to decide was whether the public could reasonably be asked to spend not inconsiderable sums of money on the ETV Centre for a relatively few years and then see the money almost wholly lost when the road went through.

It was pointed out by the Engineers that the ILEA would be paid full compensation by the GLC when they demolished the ETV Centre for their motorway. But as I saw it, one department of a local government organisation cannot realistically compensate another since, even allowing for government grants, the money was coming out of broadly the same pockets. To create a new television centre and then knock it down would be, however you looked at it, a waste of real resources. That is how the public would see it and they would be right.

In spite of the formidable problem of starting from scratch to find a new site (involving the replanning of the cable system and a possible delay in opening the service itself) the officers accepted the inevitable and at once took urgent action to find a new site. To their great credit they succeeded and ETV opened on time. But what are the lessons of this affair?

First, that a failure of internal communication is not so improbable as one might think when first coming into contact with a well-run organisation employing officers of the highest calibre in their own fields. Large organisations are

always vulnerable to it, especially when they are very new, (The GLC/ILEA structure was only two years old in 1967.)

Before any business man rushes in to censure such mishaps as these it is pertinent to remember that the same trouble can be encountered in industry. My favourite story on this subject is of a great conglomerate with a famous name and which had acquired over the years around a hundred subsidiary companies. It discovered at the eleventh hour that one of these subsidiaries was about to make a public takeover bid for another, unaware that it was in the same group!

Second, the ETV case underlines the need to read documents with an eye for the imprecise phrase, rather as one might study a typical surveyor's report on an old building. If a statement is qualified or ambiguous there is usually a reason for it. Senior officers, trained in and experienced at report writing, do not use slipshod English; therefore any apparent inconsistency should be queried and pursued until it is clarified to the Committee's satisfaction.

Thirdly, the whole business was not, as might be thought at first sight, a reflection on the local government system, but in reality a justification of it. The public's financial interest was represented by the elected amateurs insisting on the abandonment of a proposal, which would have led to abortive expenditure. Two public services were on a collision course and one had to give way. The public's educational need was not harmed because the professionals were able, against considerable odds and at great speed, to switch plans to meet the new situation.

Reluctance to recognise mistakes, more prevalent among elected politicians than their advisers I fear, is worse than the act of making them. The test of a good organisation is how it overcomes its problems and on that basis the ILEA administration scored high marks.

The close working relationship between officers and Com-

mittee Chairmen at County Hall is also notable in this ETV story. By itself it was no more than a single incident in a co-operative effort which may involve the Chairmen in two or three full days a week attending to policy matters which have to be settled at the political (but not necessarily party political) level.

Both Councillor and officer are, in distinctive but complementary ways, serving the public. Both can properly be reminded of the pleasantly truculent attitude of the man who was reported to finish every letter he wrote to officials at Government departments with the words: 'You are, Sir, my obedient servant'.

3. Relations with the Press

FOR MOST COUNCILLORS contact with the press will be a new experience. If the journalist's essential function as a means of communication between those in authority and the public is not recognised and appreciated from the outset, the encounter may be unwelcome and possibly damaging as well. A good relationship with the local papers can be an asset in the Councillor's work without either the journalist or the Councillor becoming compromised in any way or losing respect for each other. Both have objectives which do not necessarily conflict.

The wise Councillor will want to carry his public with him rather than merely impose decisions upon it. In today's complex world many of the public services are highly technical in character. So he needs to be able to explain, in straightforward terms, the reasons for action which may have an immediate impact on the citizen's daily life.

The tendency for many years now has been for Council constituencies to grow bigger by amalgamations and various piecemeal reforms. The size of a Councillor's ward is now usually too large to maintain communication with his electorate by personal contact alone. The mass media of press, radio and television are essential and getting to know how to deal with them is now becoming part of his job.

Generally speaking a public authority has a duty to give,

and the public a right to receive, information on its activities, proposals and policies. (I do not, however, go so far as some journalists in regarding almost the whole administrative process as open to continuous public scrutiny. That is a topic dealt with more fully later in this chapter.)

The journalist owes his allegiance to his readers. He must never, as a reporter, become the mouthpiece of some other individual or authority. His training is to seek out the facts of a story likely to interest his readers, check them and then present them in a lively and concise form.

He may well chose to be controversial. His story might even be slanted to fit the general policy line of the paper, especially if there is a political row going on in which the paper has taken sides. But he will not knowingly mislead.

Inaccuracies of fact, unsound speculations on forthcoming events and 'scare' headlines are not uncommon, but it is fanciful to imagine that the average reporter sets out to communicate news to his public with such intentions in mind. The exceptions (and black sheep are found in every walk of life) have to be spotted by those in regular contact with the press and treated with appropriate caution. The majority of working journalists have a job to do, which is less glamorous and more arduous than is commonly supposed and they will welcome and appreciate help in doing it.

Two important factors should be borne in mind about a journalist reporting a story. First, he usually has to work to a schedule which leaves all too little time for checking or for studying the background which may be unfamiliar to him. Second, he is, with his editor and sub-editors, engaged in turning out a product which is for sale in a competitive market.

Anyone who watches the process by which an intricate and involved public announcement becomes a readable and exciting story, illustrated pictorially and supported by con-

roversial reactions from some of the people affected, often in the space of a few hours, will marvel that so few errors do appear. The risk of mistakes is inevitably great when news is handled at the pace demanded by daily papers competing among themselves and against radio and television.

The local weekly paper is less vulnerable to these pressures, but on the other hand may have to rely heavily on young 'cub' reporters working with a small staff. It will not have the checking system of news editors and sub-editors of the Fleet Street daily paper. Even so the standard of accuracy in local journalism is extremely high and it will usually outdo the national daily in getting individual names right. People seem to excuse the national, but never the local paper in this respect!

Much depends on the extent to which the local editor himself is knowledgeable in Council affairs and personalities. Where he knows the Council and the leading personalities well, his journalistic instinct will tell him if a piece by one of his staff seems to be unlikely or unreliable. An apathetic editorial approach to Council affairs often leads to garbled accounts of its activities with irritated Councillors in turn giving a cold-shoulder to the paper. This of course only makes matters worse.

My first budget speech as a Borough Finance Chairman, was, for example, treated quite differently by each of the papers serving a borough with a very large population. The weekly with the smallest circulation, but whose editor was keen on local affairs (his father had been Mayor) published it in full. They just had too few staff to spend time doing a precis of it. I felt more than a little sorry for the readers ploughing through all those figures.

The largest paper boasting a 100,000 circulation, and diametrically opposed to me politically, gave an excellent short summary of the speech and some extracts from the

more pungent comments made by Opposition Councillors. The paper then attacked the budget vigorously in its editorial. (This was, of course, an example of the good old rule 'comment is free, but facts are sacred'.)

A newspaper group of several papers serving different parts of the Borough curiously put a brief version of the speech on those pages which were varied from district to district, so some parts of the Borough got it and others did not.

Finally one paper, although its reporter was present throughout the Budget Meeting, simply took the first four paragraphs of the speech (which had been circulated in full to the press) and deleted the rest. As these opening remarks were largely introductory in character the result was utterly meaningless.

It was not the journalist's fault. I afterwards learnt that he had written a careful summary of the debate, but there was only four inches of space available so his piece was spiked and the first page of my script put in verbatim instead. He was rather more upset than I was; it is not necessarily the journalist on a paper who is responsible if a speech is badly reported. One must always be careful not to jump to conclusions or to over-react to poor reporting. It can be counter-productive as the following incident shows.

A Councillor, angry at what he considered to be distorted accounts of his speeches in the local rag, finally said in an outburst to the editor 'Either print my next speech in full or print none of it'. The editor is reported to have taken him at his word and gave his next speech verbatim, to the member's acute discomfiture. It began something like this: 'Er—Mr. Mayor—er—ah—I wanted to—er—make one or—well perhaps a number of—ah—points on this—er let me see—er—really most important and—er—if I may say so—historic—er—paper—that is to say—report . . .' and so on in ever more incoherent vein.

It is usually a salutary experience to see a verbatim account of one's own speeches and to realise that some speakers who ramble on are extraordinarily difficult to report, particularly if their own minds are unclear at the outset. The lot of the journalist at many council meetings is not an easy one.

Personal Publicity

Part of a candidate's electioneering programme will normally be concerned with getting his personality across to the voters. However well known he may think he is, the shrewd candidate will realise that most people in a large town, borough or a widespread county area will not take a close interest in their local political representatives. He needs to keep in the public eye during his time as a Council member both because it helps the citizen to be aware of his Councillors, and also to avoid the doorstep accusation at the following election: 'We only hear about you when you want our votes'.

Since people going into public life are for the most part not averse to publicity—or they would shrink from standing altogether—they are exposed to the temptation to overdo the personal side of it.

Many young Councillors in the more political urban areas have sought election to local government as a stepping stone to higher (political) things. Indeed Parliament might be a better place if more of its members had done the same, but that is another story.

New go-getting Councillors often tend to seek personal notice in the local papers and eventually in the national dailies by assiduous letter writing, hand-outs of their speeches in and out of the Council and press releases on any personal event which might make a few lines in the diary column.

Given a sense of proportion and a reasonable 'nose' for news value there is much to be said for such efforts.

The journalist's axiom 'names make news' is always worth remembering. Long turgid reports from a Council Committee often couched in officialese of the most obscure character can frequently be made into attractive reading if personalised by a Councillor. Most Chairmen of Committees will get more coverage for such a story if they give a short pithy comment with it.

Similarly the new back bench member who has special knowledge of the subject or who represents the Ward affected can jump in with his own short statement. Better still, if he disagrees with the report, he can 'challenge' the Chairman on some point of fact or argument. The press will like the controversy and people who might otherwise have known nothing of the problem will read about it.

A Chairman may well be irritated by such intervention, especially from a newcomer, but that should never put off anyone from having a go. Local government is permanently in danger of dying from apathy, seldom if ever threatened by lively controversy in public places.

A Councillor can help journalists, when he proposes to make a stand on a local issue, by ensuring that some advance warning of his intentions is given. There is no point in making a brilliant 'surprise' speech during a dull Council Meeting if the press, unaware of the impending event, happen to be out of the chamber at the time—or have gone home.

I have listened, particularly at GLC meetings, to powerful speeches, whose chief value would have been if people other than the Councillors could read them. Yet they were delivered late at night when the press and public galleries were empty! An advance hand-out giving a few key sentences is a useful technique to avoid this waste of a good speech. The full text

of a speech is not necessary except on special occasions and the busy journalist probably won't have time to read it all and extract the news from it.

Most Councillors are concerned with weekly rather than daily papers and have to remember only the days on which various sections of the paper are 'put to bed'. Usually local papers keep the front page flexible until the last possible moment so as to capture the latest local news, but the inside pages including the letter column, the diary and Council reports and debates may be set up and locked away for printing a day or two earlier. Unless these schedules are known to a Councillor he may miss the weekly edition and if his piece is of topical interest only, he may lose it altogether.

In London and those big cities served by the national and provincial dailies one must know when copy can be received by the paper in time for the edition which appears in one's own region. The London dailies take news up to 4 a.m. but naturally this is always of major national or international significance. This is why events in a London borough may be given space in the earlier editions which are printed the previous evening and go out to Ireland, Cornwall, Wales and Scotland and are then cut out to make room for international news in the 4 a.m. editions which are read by Londoners!

The Councillor in the provinces who has some exceptional news can take advantage of this by getting it in as early as possible the preceding day. This also gives the journalists time to check and elaborate on the story. A back-bench member is rarely in a position to make news in this way since individually, unlike a committee chairman or Council Leader, he has no executive power. The national press are always more interested in announcements of decisions which will actually affect people in their daily lives, rather than in

comments. Only a few national papers have a full time 'Local Government Correspondent' and the tendency is to report principally on the largest Councils such as the GLC, Birmingham, Manchester and Glasgow. So the member on a district council will have to be content with coverage in his local paper only unless something quite sensational occurs. He might bear in mind, however, that most local reporters have private arrangements with national dailies and if they think an item merits wider publicity, they will pass it on to Fleet Street. They are paid for this on a lineage basis.

Dealing with Inaccuracies

When a newspaper publishes a story which is not a fair account of a speech, or plainly inaccurate, it is unwise to rush in with a sharp attack on the paper. Unless there is reason to believe that the mistake was intentional, the best plan is not to appear personally wounded by a lapse of this kind. Indeed if the error is of little or no consequence, it is probably safely ignored. The public memory of what appears in newspapers is, fortunately for us all, short.

Alternatively a mistake can be corrected, in passing, in the course of a letter to the editor raising new and rather more substantial and interesting points for discussion. 'Incidentally, your report was not quite right when it said ... etc., etc.'

This is so much better than the heavy-handed correction which so often starts with the pompous 'My attention has been drawn to your report ...'. Who drew it, one wonders? And why bother to correct a local paper if it is apparently not worth reading regularly in the first place?

It should be borne in mind too that corrections, and above all, denials, merely attract more notice to the original report than might have occurred if it had been left alone. A sound

tactic in dealing with an untrue accusation is not to deny it, but to take a strong positive line which directly contradicts it. Denials, for some deep psychological reason, which I cannot explain, leave an atmosphere of suspicion about. They are best avoided. People will, perversely perhaps, feel there is no smoke without fire.

These are, however, matters of judgement which have to be decided on the merits of each case. Sometimes it may not be possible to leave a politically damaging challenge or allegation unanswered. Silence may seem to prove the point of the accusation. But the weight behind the charge should be assessed too; it lowers a councillor's standing if he stoops to deal with every minor attack which appears in the letter columns of the papers regardless of its significance or that of the writer.

The Publicity Boomerang

One word of warning on personal publicity may be not out of place. Let us assume that the new Councillor has done all the right things. He has got to know the local journalists and the editors, ensured that the papers all have a decent picture of him (chosen by someone other than himself if possible) and a short background biography, and are given advance notice of any exciting or novel steps he takes or unusual speeches he proposes to make.

He has set out to obtain publicity partly for himself as well as for his public work. However devoted he is to local affairs, his activities must bring him certain attention as a public figure in his own right. His private life is accordingly more exposed than if he remained out of the limelight. This is particularly so for the keen young politician who enjoys personal attention and exploits all the opportunities available to him to achieve it.

It is no use complaining subsequently if some private difficulty—a business setback, a divorce or a misdemeanour—is given sensational treatment in the local paper. Even the citizen who has never sought press publicity may have to face some intrusion on his private life if an unfortunate error is nationally interesting.

But the man who has put himself forward as a public figure can expect greater coverage of his affairs if things go wrong for him. He has made himself news—locally or nationally—and his other actions automatically acquire greater news value. To be fined for speeding is, for example, not likely to bring the man in the street the slightest notice in the press. But if he happens to be a Councillor it at once becomes news. And if he is unlucky enough to be on the Road Safety Committee his disgrace will be complete.

Nowadays public censure of the private deeds and the morals of people in public life is far less severe than it once was. But before setting out to build up a public personality for himself, the new Councillor should face the inherent dangers of a boomerang. He will then be less likely to turn on the press with bitter charges of 'intrusion' or misrepresentation, which only make matters worse. The best guidance that can be offered to anyone faced with mounting personal criticism is not to feed the flames. Just keep quiet. Like Brer Rabbit, you lay low.

Radio and Television

When local government in Britain consisted of over a thousand district councils and a hundred and fifty County Councils and County Boroughs, radio and television did not take a keen or consistent interest in the work of Councillors. The emergence of the GLC completely changed attitudes in this sector of the media largely because of the GLC's size

and apparent importance. Consequently the reorganised local government system in England and Wales is likely to attract similar attention. Obviously, the more ordinary people likely to be personally affected by an organisation such as a local authority, the more the journalist wants to cover its actions. He is, after all, concerned with reader, listener or viewer response and he must try to deal with matters which concern as many people as possible. The Councillor in the modern world will now increasingly find himself in demand by the growing number of local radio stations as well as the existing television network.

Unlike the press, which is indirect, television is a direct field of communication in which some people come over effectively and others do not. Quite often the poor platform speaker, but good conversationalist, does well because television is an intimate medium, speaking to people relaxing in their homes rather than sitting in some cold organised meeting hoping to be roused and inspired.

Television demands quick thinking and the ability to concentrate arguments in a very few words. An interview on a current affairs TV programme will seldom be longer than four minutes and may be as short as two. Only a few good answers can be got across and there is no time for long preambles or historical backgrounds. The quick incisive speaker will always score: there is no room for the grand manner.

The close-up technique tends cruelly to exaggerate facial expressions and mannerisms. A perfectly honourable and straightforward man may seem shiftily just because he is hesitant and ill at ease. It is vital to exude confidence, to give an air of authority without being pompous and to look pleasant and friendly even when making a strong point. Aggression seldom comes over well on TV. Firmness with a smile can be compelling.

The best advice one can give is simply to seek every opportunity which presents itself of getting on television and radio. Practice, although hard to come by, is the only way to become a really effective TV and radio performer. Above all the Councillor should impress his own personality and conviction on the viewer or listener. It is dull and ineffective to talk always in the third person. Without exaggerating the first person singular, the good performer on TV and radio can come across powerfully if at the right moment—especially when under pressure from an interviewer—he exclaims ‘I personally believe that . . . etc., etc.’, or words to that effect. The impact of a point is enormously heightened if this technique is used with skill and discretion. Radio, for example, is a particularly personal and individual medium, more so even than television which is watched to a greater extent in groups, i.e. by families. When broadcasting one should always have a mental picture of one listener (for example, a car driver travelling between home and work) rather than a large audience of people.

‘Off The Record’

People who are new to contact with the press are often unsure of the way in which certain phrases are used, such as ‘on the record’, ‘off the record’, ‘attributable’, ‘non-attributable’, ‘background’ and so on. Obviously it is essential to be as clear as possible about these terms otherwise some remark which was meant to be a confidential aside will appear in the paper to everyone’s subsequent embarrassment. Journalists are in no doubt about a reference to something being ‘off the record’. It just cannot be used, if indeed it really is confidential information.

On the other hand, a journalist must not be prevented from publishing material which he has obtained from other

sources merely because an official or councillor or MP tells him that it is 'off the record'. It was, and probably still is, an old political trick to muzzle the press by using so-called confidential briefings to avoid publication of information which might in many cases have been unearthed by a reporter with a good scent for a story.

For all practical purposes, however, a Councillor giving an opinion to a journalist and making it clear that this is 'off the record' will not find his confidence betrayed.

The phrase 'non-attributable' means that the information can be used, but its source must not be quoted. Journalists do not disclose how they obtained their information for the very good reason that their sources would quickly dry up if they did. This is an unbreakable rule (indeed journalists have gone to jail rather than reveal their sources, even in court). Provided the Councillor is always precise about the non-attributable nature of his remarks, every time he talks to a journalist, his position is quite secure.

Whether he should pass on information which is otherwise confidential is another matter and one for his own conscience. Most councils have a system of marking Committee papers and documents so as to indicate clearly whether they may be discussed in public or not and, if so, at what stage they become free of any confidential markings. A Councillor who gives information culled from such documents may well be in breach of standing orders, but it is extremely difficult to pin down anyone when leaks to the press are appearing.

I have known several occasions, particularly in party meetings, where steps amounting almost to panic measures were taken in an effort to discover who was passing on private information. The curious thing about it was that, in all cases, the actual material 'leaked' was of little significance in itself. Moreover, it could have been pieced together by any intelligent journalist knowing his way around the council. Some

newspaper gossip column items are based on little more than guesswork and the denials and other comments which subsequently appear often give away more real information than the diary piece did in the first place.

Other more general words used in conversations with journalists are 'background' or 'guidance'. This is similar to 'non-attributable' and really means that the Councillor is helping the reporter with facts, explanations and opinions which enable him to get a clearer picture of the story. Local government is so complex that any help of this kind is always appreciated by the press and it does mean that ill-informed and misleading news stories are less likely to appear.

If the Councillor is asked to comment on some piece of news and is willing to be quoted he should either have something already in his mind or offer to ring back in a few minutes. A few hastily chosen words can easily lead to misfortune. It is so much better to sit down with pen and paper and work out a good short statement (two or three sentences is usually enough) and then read it over to the journalist. One then has a copy of it if there is any subsequent argument about what was actually said to the press.

If a quote is given, but with a request that this is non-attributable, care must be taken to see how the statement will appear. 'A spokesman for the majority party said ...' or 'A leading member of the Council said ...' are two common ways of reporting this kind of non-attributable statement, but it does at once narrow down the number of possible informants. I have been present at a Borough Council party meeting where just such a news item resulted in everyone present being solemnly asked to stand up and say whether they were the culprit. Needless to say, no one owned up.

The new Councillor is probably not going to be involved in press releases as such, but the practice is once again quite simple. If a story is of considerable importance it is helpful

to give newsmen some time to consider it and to work on the related aspects of it. They may want explanations of points which are unclear, further personal comment, a picture or an interview.

By giving a precise publication time (known as an 'embargo') before which the story must not appear in print or on the tape machines available to the public, the statement can be released to the press a day or two beforehand. Long periods between dispatching a story and its publication are quite unnecessary and there is a tendency for these to get lost. The risk of an embargo being broken by mistake is also greater. The exception would be the publication of a major report which perhaps needs a week to read.

Brief news stories are best released for 'immediate' publication and all papers likely to be interested should be given the story simultaneously. One must always bear in mind, however, that local weekly papers invariably take two or three days from finalising their copy to appearing on the bookstalls and it does not please them if they have on Friday a 'news' item which appeared in a daily paper the previous day. This is, of course, another typical case where the embargo method is justified.

Committee Meetings and the Press

A lot of nonsense is talked on the subject of admitting press (and public) to committee meetings. The allegation that something going on behind closed doors is inherently suspect is the easiest charge to make since it can only be effectively answered by opening the doors. The purpose of holding meetings in private (as the vast majority of meetings of committees of all varieties in business, government, social life, etc., are indeed held), far from being sinister, is merely practical commonsense.

The first principle to remember is that a Council is an administrative organisation and not a legislative body like Parliament. It is one thing to debate in public the state of the law and proposals for changing it; quite another to conduct the administration of the law in some detail before a press and public gallery.

The true comparison is not, as is often suggested, between committees of Parliament which are mostly part of the law-making process. It is with the administrative machine of the central government, i.e., the Ministries of Whitehall. They run much of their business through departmental and inter-departmental committees which, from what one hears, are legion.

No one has suggested that all these immensely powerful groups of civil servants, comparable in essential respects with local government committees, should be open to press and public attendance. The idea is too impractical and too ridiculous. But the principle is just the same. Both are administering the law: the one centrally and the other locally, one by non-elected civil servants, sometimes under Ministerial guidance, the other by elected Councillors advised by officials.

To push the analogy further, the top decisions in government are taken in Cabinet and in Cabinet Committees. None of these meetings is open to the public and the reason is not simply one of national security either.

Once a committee meeting is open to press and public observation, members are bound to speak to the press and public (or at least with them in mind) and not merely to each other. The fact that one's words are being noted down for publishing in abbreviated form to tens of thousands of people who were not present at the meeting leads to an entirely different kind of speaking. It produces debate instead of discussion; speeches instead of conversational points. The

informality is lost and so is the freedom to think aloud without the fear that some chance remark may appear in print and look like a considered statement.

People who wonder why politicians on television tend to speak in clichés and carefully qualified sentences will soon realise the dangers of talking freely if they become Councillors and find themselves the centre of a storm over a few ill-chosen words. Many Councillors are in any case not good at speech-making as such, but excellent in committee. Turn the Committee into another public debating place and you will soon lose or limit their contribution.

Politics is also an important factor in all this. It is human nature for people in political life (whether independents or party members) to take up set positions in public, but to be more flexible in private. If all political bargaining took place in public there would be precious little movement or workable compromise at all. In the immediate post-war years the then Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, called for open diplomacy ('cards on the table—face upwards'). It was shortlived. It just does not work.

Education committees, the biggest spenders of all in local government and controlling by any standards one of the most important local services, have by law been open to press and public since 1902. How thoroughly in fact do the press cover these meetings? How many members of the public turn up regularly to hear the debates? What happens to the character of debate in these meetings compared to those held in private? And where are all the real decisions taken now?

Parliament has now decreed a much wider opening of Council Committees to the press and public and local government practice will adjust and adapt itself to the new situation. No doubt pressure will develop for sub-committees or even the private party gatherings to be opened up, because real

decisions may well be pushed down the line once the main committees become public forums. Politics always tends to blossom in the sunshine of public attention. So a kind of Gresham's Law develops with the politically bad driving out the privately good discussion from the meetings.

The extent to which administration by local Councillors—or indeed by the local arm of the central government which consists of area health boards, water authorities, public transport authorities and so on—is pushed into a continuing public spectacle while Whitehall carries on its affairs in total secrecy will continue to be debated. Time will show where the boundaries of confidentiality ought finally to be drawn. Naturally the press will always want greater disclosure everywhere because that is its business. Whether it improves or worsens the effectiveness of government is another matter. I have never hesitated to remind my friends in the press of the double standards which can, however, arise. For example, the Press Council at its first meeting many years ago took two main decisions. One, to campaign for committee meetings of local authorities to be opened to the press. The other, that its own meetings should be held in private.

4. Party Politics in Local Government

PERHAPS THE MOST DOG-EARED CLICHÉ of them all in local government is the one that begins 'of course I don't think there should be any politics in local government'. Taken literally the statement is meaningless since politics is an umbrella word covering systems of government as well as the battle between parties and individuals. The local council, however small, is itself part of this country's political system.

There are, however, real grounds for argument if the reference is to *party* politics. A respectable case can be made out against certain aspects of the party system as applied to local government. But most people who recite the blanket condemnation of party politics seem to me to have only the vaguest idea how the party system works, still less what would happen without it.

Many new Councillors, themselves elected on a party ticket, may have given little thought to the principles involved. Even though they may have been dragooned into standing by their local party association, they could well have played little part in its activities, except of a minor or social character, before being approached.

The power of the party machine and the machinations of those running it are likely to be a new experience even for the keen party member once he has become a Councillor.

Since most Councils in urban areas and a growing number in rural areas are developing a party system this chapter is devoted to looking at the background and the issues involved.

There is nothing very new in party involvement in local government. In the nineteenth century there were bitter struggles between Conservatives and Liberals over control of the new municipal boroughs set up under the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act. The London County Council was contested on a party basis at its inception in 1888 and won by the Liberals (known as Progressives) until 1907 when the Conservatives (known as Municipal Reformers) succeeded in 'capturing it'. Their control lasted twenty-seven years when Labour won in 1934. Yet as late as the nineteen forties and fifties one still heard the cry that Labour had brought party politics into local government!

I have often told questioners on this point at public meetings how I once came across an old volume of Minutes of my local Conservative Association (we were moving the office at the time) and opened them by chance at 1895. The Secretary had recorded with pleasure, and in beautiful copperplate handwriting, that *Unionist* candidates had won all the seats in the vestry elections that year. The vestries were the municipal forerunners of the Metropolitan Borough Councils and supposed to be quite non-political.

If, then, politics is really the business of governing, whether nationally or locally, what is the place of the party system in local Council affairs?

Theory and practice lead to the same simple conclusion: it is the expression of the fact that a group of people working together are normally stronger than the same number of people acting independently. A party is a team. Party politics is the operation of team work in democratic government. The justification for it lies in its sustained ability to accomp-

lish results unattainable by the lone politician or the unorganised group.

The exceptional individual may well achieve a notable feat from time to time (notable precisely because unusual) but, in a democratic body, the individual will not consistently over a period get the same results as the team. In business life the one-man band is often able to beat the slower moving group, but democratic checks and procedures do not apply. Moreover the prizes, along with the financial risks, go to the man of action. The best Committee in business life is the Committee of one.

Similar comparisons cannot be made with Councils where the money is publicly raised, and the system necessarily committee-ridden. In such a democratic arena an organised party is bound to prevail in the art of getting things done. The abuses of the party system must be recognised too, but they should not be allowed to obscure the paramount advantages of common action. The party system will be present in most larger authorities today and likely to be dominant in all Councils in Great Britain after the Maud reforms. What then are the chief gains to be obtained from it for the public?

First, it enables people to identify candidates with similar broad political approaches to the social and economic problems of the day. As Councils become larger in area, fewer members have to represent more constituents. For the past century or so it has been impossible for LCC members to be personally known to all but a small minority of the people in their constituencies.

I doubt if most people today in the big cities, large urban districts or widespread rural areas could name, off-hand, their local member, still less describe him in more than the briefest terms.

The GLC members nowadays represent the same con-

stituencies as MPs although they have no equivalent to a parliamentary salary (only the attendance allowance which is much smaller) and frequently have to earn their own livings as well as cope with Council responsibilities. Elsewhere in Britain wards are generally larger in area and population than they once were and normally cover several communities instead of just one.

In these circumstances, the public need a clear guide to the political outlook of the individual candidate and this is provided by his party label. It may be an imperfect method, but it is as much as most voters seem to want. The fact that independents normally poll a derisory vote in elections for the larger councils when they are opposed by party candidates indicates that.

Votes for party candidates standing jointly in a particular ward tend to vary between each of them more in terms of the position of a name on the ballot paper than a difference—however wide—in ability, personality or length of service. Now that party names are permitted on ballot papers the trend will be for even closer voting between candidates standing together under one party banner in multi-member wards.

If the public did not want party-backed candidates it could vote them down and put independents in instead. All the trends in the post-war years have been in exactly the opposite direction. One must assume that voters prefer candidates sponsored by parties rather than independents.

The second advantage is that party support has made possible a large inflow of young people into local government. The cost of a campaign in a large ward would effectively bar most younger people if they had to bear it themselves. I became a Councillor at twenty-two in 1949 when earning about £6.50 a week as a schoolmaster. Without the financing of the campaign by the party, to say nothing of the voluntary organisation of a hundred or so keen party workers,

local government would have been a closed shop for me. Thousands of other people in all walks of life have come into local affairs because the competitive party system made it possible.

When the operation of the party system in the day-to-day work of the Council is examined there is probably less agreement about its proper role than the rather obvious points I have made so far. Taking the advantages first, the most striking gain is in continuity of policy. If a large authority is dominated by a majority of members belonging to one party and having a common approach to social and economic affairs it is likely that the authority will pursue a course which can be visualised in advance for some way ahead. This is immensely helpful to the administration which can devote its time and thought to forward planning without fearing that major policies are vulnerable to rapid changes in attitude or, worse still, that no fundamental policy can be agreed upon at all.

In practice all large authorities, whether 'independent' or party-controlled, have to work on the basis of a stable majority of some kind. The party system merely formalises it, makes it clearer to the public and thus more open to public debate. In consequence it becomes a more disciplined and effective force.

The discipline itself, which is always the most criticised and least understood feature of local parties, has a vital part to play in good local administration. Councils, like Governments, often have to face unpopular decisions. They may, for example, have studied a highly technical problem and looked at various alternatives. The public at that stage may be wholly in favour of some general proposition such as building more roads and improving traffic, without any inkling of the practical and personal problems likely to arise.

When the schemes start to take effect, various vested

interests form up in opposition. They can, if well organised and imaginatively led, make a much bigger impact than their size warrants. The pressure on an individual Councillor can be intense and persistent. His positive commitment to the team, and the probable loss of his seat if he deserts it, will usually be powerful incentives to see the agreed policy through.

If this were not so, it is hard to see how any policy could be implemented if a sufficiently determined minority opposition raised its voice against it. No system of administration can work effectively if its decisions can be black-balled in this way by those, however few in number, who oppose a particular scheme which adversely affects them even if it is in the general interest of the public that it should go through. That is not democracy, but stagnation.

Minorities, however, have their rights too. The public opposition to a Council's scheme will, if it is well handled, usually bring about useful improvements or alleviations. All parties are sensitive to public pressure and willing to make compromises provided they do not destroy the essentials of a proposal which has majority backing.

The party which is in opposition on the Council may find it a disheartening experience if the majority party is heavy-handed in its use of power. When a party which has been in opposition for many years suddenly triumphs at the polls it is sorely tempted to pay off old scores. In the long run such behaviour does not pay, but it is no use pretending that it can always be avoided.

I well remember my first months of my time as a young Councillor following just such a landslide victory in 1949. The previous majority party had three years earlier won control in a massive election victory. Assuming—most unwisely as it turned out—that they were set for a long spell of power, they proceeded to throw out large numbers of

Councillors from School Management Boards and similar minor, but often coveted, local positions.

The personal ill-feeling, particularly among people who had served their schools for many years, was intense. But eventually retribution followed. When the voters transferred their allegiance again at the following election there was strong pressure to retaliate. To some extent the same intemperate attitude ('we are the masters now') prevailed.

In retrospect I am sure that these tactics, however natural after bitter electioneering warfare, are short sighted. Churchill's famous dedication in his war memoirs is worth recalling :

In War	:	Resolution
In Defeat	:	Defiance
In Victory	:	Magnanimity
In Peace	:	Goodwill

The hardest of these to achieve is magnanimity, so often derided as weakness by the hard-liners of a newly elected Council. Nevertheless it surely pays dividends in the long run. A majority however large will find its work flows more easily if it allows some 'give' in its relations with the minority group.

Acute strain between the parties on a Council, especially where the margin between them is tiny, can, if it persists, hamper the effectiveness of the administration. Party politics of this fractious and often childish kind is positively harmful to good local government. But, as far as one can tell, it is the exception rather than the rule. There are usually only a few particular members who develop and incite animosity between the two sides, and it is up to the majority of moderate people to exert their influence against it.

Vigorous political debate is the life blood of democracy and we should never flinch from it or seek to damp it down

into some dull compromise which satisfies nobody. But the tendency for discussion to deteriorate into an undignified slanging match is always present. The commonsense of members generally will be the best deterrent.

Another, and probably more serious, criticism of party politics in local government is that local parties act on the orders of their central party offices in London. Linked with this allegation is the charge that party-dominated Councils conduct their affairs differently if their own party happens to wield power at Westminster than if it is in opposition.

There is not much evidence to support the first of these contentions. Councillors of all parties have a certain rugged independence of view about their party headquarters. Constituency selection committees are renowned for their dislike of intervention from central party offices and, in my own experience, there is a similar healthy dislike of central interference in local Council activities even if it comes only in the form of advice.

For some years I was head of a party's local government organisation in London. I had to tread with some delicacy when suggesting possible courses of action to the party groups on the Councils on matters of current political dispute. One never gave advice on anything at all if it was not part of some political controversy. I have never heard of ordinary day-to-day decisions being influenced in any way by national party organisations.

In practice the Party headquarters are just not equipped to tell thousands of local Councillors what they should or should not do. Most of the contact is in the form of supplying ammunition for debate, particularly on bigger issues which have national implications, rather than giving guidance on what policies a particular majority party should follow. The same applies to the local party associations who, once the

election is over, leave the Councillors they sponsored, financed and fought for to get on with their job at the Town Hall as they think fit.

Indeed, ironically, it is likely that a Ratepayer Association would keep a closer eye on Ratepayer Councillors than the local branch of a political party, because it is exclusively concerned with local affairs whereas the political parties are most of the time thinking in national and parliamentary terms.

Some evidence does exist that party-controlled Councils do react more violently to interference from Governments of an opposite political persuasion than if their political friends are in power. It is so much easier to attack a Government if no political loyalties are involved. This is especially so if people believe there is some electoral mileage to be got out of it.

A certain tension between national and local government is inevitable and probably inherent in a system of directly-elected local Councils. It would be a mockery of democracy if the Town Hall always agreed with Whitehall. Where the parties in control differ the tensions are heightened and my personal view of such a situation is that it benefits local government rather than upsets it.

Governments, whatever their party colour, do not like adverse publicity. It is possible to win ground in argument with Ministries if one is prepared to be tough and to use the public platform which all Councils possess to reinforce one's case. Nothing whatever is to be gained by adopting a deferential attitude to Ministers or senior Civil Servants.

Real danger lies in the possibility of a Council becoming hesitant to push its views far enough for fear of embarrassing colleagues of a similar political outlook in Westminster. Councillors are, after all, usually active in national political

affairs through their local party associations and it is awkward if a conflict of interest develops.

Clearly a Government will want to please those of its supporters who are running local authorities, but where it is forcing through unpopular decisions, some pressure may well be put on the local Councillors not to rock the boat. If that situation is allowed to develop local government would soon become a mere lackey of Government departments.

A striking incident which illustrates the way conflicts can be turned to advantage even if Council and Government are of the same political party occurred during my time as Finance Chairman of a large Metropolitan Borough. We had decided, after much heart searching, to take over the refuse collection when the contract with a private firm (one of the few remaining in this field) expired.

The capital cost of new equipment, vehicles and works to depots was around £250,000 and we proposed to borrow this in the usual way, paying off the capital and interest over a period of years. Since borrowing money from outside a Council's own resources then required Ministerial approval we duly applied to the Ministry for permission.

To my amazement, the Town Clerk subsequently informed me that he had heard on the grapevine that permission was likely to be refused. The reason was that the particular method we had in mind for dealing with the rubbish collected was different from that of other boroughs. By long tradition in our Borough the dustmen had the 'totting' rights. This is the ancient practice of sorting out the refuse and selling anything of value. The proceeds of sales, which the dustment had most efficiently organised, were distributed among them on a mutually agreed basis.

In other boroughs the Council took a percentage, but we had washed our hands, as it were, of any involvement in this

lucrative process and it had all worked very well for as long as anyone could remember. The Ministry, however, argued that, following the end of the private contract, the arrangements should be brought into line with other Councils' practice; otherwise they feared there might be a general move among Councils to leave totting income entirely to the dustmen.

The principle at stake, as it seemed to me, was whether the Ministry had any right to determine or even influence a matter as local and detailed as this. If a Council, governing a borough of over a third of a million people, could not be left alone to handle its own refuse collection the prospects for local democracy would be bleak indeed. The public, who after all were our customers, merely wanted an efficient collection and we, not the Ministry, were responsible to them for the management of it. Moreover we were dealing with a civil servant, not the Minister himself who probably had no knowledge that an objection was going to be made by his department.

Most detailed decisions are, in the nature of things, settled by civil servants in the name of, but without the knowledge of, their Ministers. Thousands of planning applications, for example, are so decided every year by the Department of the Environment and only the most important can ever go before the Minister himself. No reasonable person would complain about this provided the civil servant does not overstep his authority.

Yet here we were, duly elected Aldermen and Councillors, being told by a non-elected, anonymous civil servant how we were to run our refuse service. And the formal procedure of loan sanction was being used as threat to make us toe the line.

I accordingly asked the Town Clerk to say politely but firmly to the official concerned that we would not budge, and

moreover that the grounds of his objection were invalid and a misuse of loan sanction procedure. Provided the financial basis of our proposed borrowing was sound, the way we collected our dust was our business.

He came back the next day to say that the Ministry was adamant. (I am bound to add he was just as shocked at their approach to the problem as I was.) So what were we to do about it? After consulting the Leader of the Council, the Whips and the other Committee Chairmen affected, I sent a message back through the Town Clerk to Whitehall. This was simply that if they did not grant us permission to borrow we would raise the whole £250,000 direct from the rates (It would have added ten pence) and simultaneously attack the Government in public for a gross interference in local affairs.

As the then Minister was fond of making eloquent speeches about the value of freedom for local government the possibility of a first class row in public between Councillors and Ministers all belonging to the same party was probably not lost on the official. Loan sanction was granted.

It is only frank to admit that an element of bluff was helpful here. I am not sure how far my party would have gone in embarrassing the Minister, if a confrontation had in fact been reached. But the civil servant could not afford to take the risk of adverse newspaper comment, so the crunch never came. The walls of Jericho fell at the sound of the trumpet and this, being bloodless, is always the most satisfactory victory.

It has to be admitted that this story is something of an exception. The really tough bargaining between local and national administrations takes place when rival political parties face each other across the negotiating table. Fortunately there is a consistent and perverse habit among the voters

of choosing local Councillors who are against the party currently in power at Westminster. So the dialogue between Town Hall and Whitehall is normally conducted in more vigorous political language than it might otherwise be. And all the better for it too.

5. In Council and Committee

COUNCILS DIFFER WIDELY in their working arrangements for the conduct of business, but in all except the very smallest authorities, a huge pile of paper will descend on the members. It would be tedious and time-wasting to have verbal reports at Committee Meetings on matters which can be circulated in advance. Members should therefore always have a fair opportunity to assimilate the background of agenda items and consider the issues at stake before the meeting itself.

Attempts to introduce new points of major significance at the meeting itself should normally be resisted since this amounts to an infringement of the layman's right to think over carefully the technical and professional advice he is given. Unless members (and particularly Chairmen) are strict about this, decisions can be pushed through Committees on ill-considered information and are often afterwards regretted.

If the plea of urgency is made (for example, that a tender has to be accepted before the next meeting) it is legitimate to inquire why the information came so late to the Committee. A Finance Committee especially has to be firm about such tactics or it will soon become no more than a dignified rubber stamp on decisions made by other Committees.

Paper work, although it may seem a chore, is an essential armoury for the Councillor in his role as a check on

bureaucracy. He must recognise, however, that it can also be a double-edged weapon. An officer once remarked to me, when I complained about the unnecessary length of certain documents, 'Well, sir, all officers know that Committees love statistics. It gives them something to talk about.' What I suspect he really meant was that excessively long and detailed reports can lead the members away from the real issue at stake (while others abandon the attempt to understand the report altogether and let it pass) and the chances of acceptance are often greatly enhanced.

I have no doubt that undue length and prolixity also occurs simply because the officers have not carefully considered what is the most helpful form in which to cast a report. They may not necessarily have set out deliberately to get a project through by creating a cloud of statistics and professional jargon. But the member has a clear right to see that his information is presented in a way which tells him what is relevant and shows what areas of decision are open to him. Too much information is not quite as serious as too little, but it is bad practice and a Councillor should challenge it whenever it happens. His time, after all, is given free and reading a thick wodge of Council papers in the early hours is onerous enough without a mass of unnecessary data which inhibits decision-making.

A colleague of mine who served for a while on a public authority claimed that his single positive achievement during his work on its Committee was his suggestion that all the documents which they had to consider each month should be prepared on different coloured paper according to whether they were for background information only (blue) or reported action already taken (green) or made a recommendation where there was no alternative (yellow) or actually required a real decision from the Committee (red). The spectacular result of this change was, to everyone's surprise, that the

documents on red paper were only about five per cent of the total.

Even without going to these colourful lengths, one can spend a useful few minutes analysing all the documents for one Committee meeting and marking those where a real choice between alternatives actually exists. It will often be surprisingly few, but they are clearly the reports which need the closest scrutiny from Councillors. There is not much point in spending time on a national wage award which in practice has to be accepted anyway; whereas an internal re-grading of staff, which can cost a lot of money, is worth the most careful consideration a Councillor can give to it.

Studying Reports

Detecting the absence of important facts in a report is something which comes from experience. Officers do not conceal vital figures from their reports. If they did it would lose them the confidence of the Council. Unfortunate omissions, on the other hand, are not uncommon in a departmentalised organisation. Reports are usually joint efforts in which many individual officers will have taken a hand. They may involve matters of great technical complexity. There will often be tables of figures and many comparisons between them. The Councillor should always be mentally questioning the figures while he reads any document.

Are the figures comparing like with like? Is the analysis before him written from the point of view of those already heavily committed to existing arrangements? (Bureaucracies don't like change and herculean endeavours are normally required to move them on to a new course.) Above all, does the argument in a report square with the Councillor's common sense of what the public feel is acceptable.

Officials are not, as their public image may imply, some

separate animal from the ordinary man in the street. As an officer once reminded me, when I was trying to push through a controversial item of expenditure which the officers were opposed to, 'Don't forget sir, that we're ratepayers here too!'

But the absorption in the administrative machine can lead to a certain insensitivity to public attitudes and the Councillor exists to check that tendency and never to become part of it. It is worth constantly reminding oneself of the axiom: 'the public are our customers'. This is just as true of local government as it is in business. And if the customer is not always right his interests are nevertheless paramount. Administration exists for his benefit, not the other way round.

Normally Committee agendas, which are prepared by the Clerk's Department, contain the items on which the administrative machine wants decisions or on which it feels that members should be given new information. But members are themselves entitled to ask for matters to be placed on the agenda and to call for an officer's report. With a good administration this is a rather infrequent occurrence because it normally correctly anticipates what members will want to discuss and covers the subjects in the agenda in the ordinary way.

A member who has a special problem which cannot be dealt with by the administration under previous decisions and therefore must come to a Committee, can and should exercise his right to get a discussion upon it. He does so by asking the Clerk's Department to arrange for an officer's report to be brought to an early meeting of the Committee concerned. It is not good practice merely to raise the matter under 'Any other Business'. This is unhelpful to the other members, who may have had no time to think about it, and to the officers whose considered advice is essential. Many Councils have so framed their Standing Orders that no such

general item appears at the end of Committee Agendas. Instead they conclude with 'Matters of Urgency' which means any item not circulated by the officers within the minimum period of notice for the meeting.

The distinction is important because a genuine matter of urgency is something which really cannot wait until the next meeting. Provided the explanation for its late circulation is acceptable, the need for immediate action is the main consideration.

Any observation or proposal on some point not contained on the agenda will be ruled out of order by a firm Chairman and he should be supported in doing so.

Party Meetings Before Committees

Councils which have a well-organised party system will probably have developed a practice of private gatherings of the parties before each Committee meeting. This enables the Chairman to talk over with his colleagues (and the senior Opposition member with his) any party political points which may arise in Committee debate. For the most part these are not numerous, especially in the smaller Councils, and the vast majority of all decisions in Committee are taken unanimously and are not the subject of party debate or acrimony at all.

Nevertheless there is nothing sinister in these private meetings, which are no more than a sensible precaution in keeping together a team which is working in as many groups as there are Committees. A party always looks silly if its members appear to be at loggerheads with each other in public. Private party meetings before Committees are most common in the larger authorities with seventy or so members where the problem of effective communication at member level is greatest.

In these party meetings the new member has an excellent opportunity to discuss with his colleagues any doubts he has on aspects of policy without risking embarrassment to his party by thinking aloud in the Committee meeting. Although Committees are themselves held in private, what a member says there and how he votes can be commented upon in Council debate. No self-respecting politician would miss the chance to have some amusement at the expense of his opponents if he finds them in disarray during a Committee meeting on some point of major political dispute. When a muddle of this kind occurs the situation can be rescued by a strong Chairman, but one is treading on very thin ice.

A most engaging Chairman of a minor Committee, who because it seldom had a political problem to deal with had dropped the pre-Committee party meetings, ran into trouble when a quite unexpected political row blew up. The Opposition members realising that the majority party had not settled a policy line pressed the matter to a vote. The result was a tie. The Chairman having used his first vote with the majority of his party colleagues then gave his casting vote the other way 'just to be fair'! The following week he had to present his report to the full Council and, greatly embarrassed, watch it soundly defeated by his own Party to ironic cheers from the Opposition.

Committees, it should not be forgotten, are the creations of Councillors. It is easy to criticise the committee as a poor means of getting things done promptly and efficiently. The old saying that 'the best committee is a committee of one' although doubtless true in one sense is really a contradiction of democracy. Committees are bound to be slower and likely to gravitate towards compromises or to avoid the nasty decision, but that is inevitable if differing public views are to be properly represented. Quick action can always be

obtained if you are ready to ride roughshod over other people's opinion. But that is not what local self-government is all about.

However, those who quote the aphorism that 'if Moses had been a committee the children of Israel would still be in Egypt' have a point. Advisory or 'consultative' committees which do not have definite responsibility for decision-making are, I feel, largely a waste of time.

One of the earlier Maud Reports indeed proposed a Committee structure, common in the USA and in South Africa, where a small Management Board of between five and nine Councillors run the whole show while the remaining Aldermen and Councillors sit on 'deliberative' Committees, solemnly deliberating. I doubt whether such deliberations, divorced as they must be from practical decision-making, are of much value. Indeed they would attract the very person who one prefers to dissuade from entering local government—the gas-bag who has an opinion on everything and is congenitally incapable of deciding anything.

Councillors should look sceptically at proposals to increase the number of Committees whatever the personal factors may be. Obviously the more Committees, the more Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen. And some people prefer to be a big fish in a small pool rather than a small fish in a big pool. But if the Committee structure is planned solely in terms of its effectiveness in executing the business of the Council these personal considerations have no place.

The same is true of that endemic democratic disease of setting up sub-committees to deal with special situations which the main committee cannot—or doesn't want to—deal with. An officer once, in a fit of despair, gave me his definition of a sub-committee. 'It is a device', he said, 'designed to bring fresh ignorance to bear on a subject.'

Attending Other Committee Meetings

The Standing Orders may permit a member to attend (although probably sitting at the back of the room) any Committee to which he does not belong; but not to speak except at the invitation of the Chairman. The GLC restricts attendance to items on which the Councillor himself has a proposal on the agenda, or a special constituency interest and at the specific invitation of the Committee.

The first system is obviously more useful to the keen newcomer who can get a better conspectus of the Council's work as a whole than he would if limited to the two or three Committees he actually belongs to. Indeed, unless one is appointed to the Policy and Resources Committee, which is highly unlikely for a new member, it is extremely difficult to acquire a sound overall view of the Council at work in all its Committees.

Reading the Committee reports which appear in the full Council Agenda is not a substitute for attending the Committee meetings and studying the documents, particularly nowadays when more work is wholly delegated to Committees and does not come to the Council at all. A Councillor really should know more about what is going on at the Town Hall than the average ratepayer who looks through the Council Agenda in the local library.

Speaking in Council

While Committee meetings are relatively intimate in character, the full Council meeting is naturally a somewhat more formal affair. Much depends on the history of the borough or the county and whether it is strongly partisan or comfortably united. The atmosphere can be thoroughly stuffy and intimidating to good discussion, or it may be lively, exhilarating and noisy. If the newcomer has followed

the advice in Chapter 1 to spend some time in the public gallery he will know what to expect in his own town or district.

The immediate problem which often worries the new arrival is his maiden speech. In the House of Commons a maiden speech takes a particular traditional form. It is non-partisan, usually refers to the problems of the constituency which has just returned the new member and is always short. In return the House does not interrupt or heckle the maiden speaker, and when he sits down, the next member congratulates him whether the speech was a brilliant debut or a fumbling failure.

Local Councils seldom have elaborate debating traditions of this kind although the GLC, which tends to copy Parliamentary practices rather slavishly at times, is nearest to it.

A carefully prepared first speech, in spite of the loss of spontaneity, is probably a wise plan for any but the most practised and versatile debater. If a controversial line is adopted on this first occasion one cannot of course expect members who disagree to grant any special protection from interruption or subsequent attack. But some people would not have it otherwise and it is for the individual to make up his own mind. A belligerent opening speech which is shot to pieces by the older hands on the Council is, all the same, a not too auspicious start to one's Council career, and I have often seen raw but outspoken maiden speakers bite the dust.

It is not sensible to take part in debates before one has absorbed the character of the Council and caught the atmosphere of the place as a debating assembly. Equally one need not be too diffident either. A prominent local government man recounted to me his first appearance at a small rural district council meeting. There were practically no circulated reports to the Council so the Clerk read them out in a long low monotone which the new member found wholly in-

audible. After an hour he rose somewhat nervously and said 'On a point of order, I can't hear what the Clerk is saying, could he possibly speak up a little'. The Chairman duly asked the Clerk to do so. As the new Councillor sat down an older member leant across to him and said 'I'm so glad you did that. I haven't heard a word he's said for the past seven and a half years.'

Question Time

After formal business and announcements from the Chair, Council agendas normally provide a period for questions to Committee Chairmen. Like 'Question Time' in the House of Commons this is an invaluable chance for the individual member in the full glare of publicity to make a point on which he feels strongly. It is a fine opportunity for the newcomer to get used to hearing his own voice in the unfamiliar atmosphere of the Chamber. He can break the ice without much risk of disaster, assuming of course that he is asking an ordinary question seeking information rather than putting over a provocative political point in the form of a question. The experienced Committee Chairman who has been answering questions for years can make a new Councillor look foolish if he invites that kind of treatment.

Questions take basically two forms: those genuinely requesting information or clarification and those which are designed for publicity purposes. Since a Chairman or the relevant officer can be asked any questions verbally or in writing at any time whether the Council is meeting or not, the Question Time procedure is normally used to get across publicly some point the Councillor wants high-lighted. It may be a constituency case which has reached an impasse at administrative level, an allegation of some failure in a Council service, an inquiry about adverse comments in the

press, a demand for figures likely to embarrass the party in power or just a debating point thinly shrouded in the guise of a question.

Some advance notice normally has to be given to the Chairman and he will be briefed by the officers not only on the prepared answer, but also on possible supplementary questions. A junior Minister in the House of Lords answering a question for the first time is reported to have read out not only the answer, but all the suggested answers to possible supplementary questions, as well as the civil servant's background note which concluded with the words 'Not a very good case I'm afraid, but it will do for the Lords'.

Few Councillors can expect such luck in questioning Chairmen and the new members should always bear in mind that, apart from his experience, the Chairman will have drawn on the extensive knowledge of the administrative machine for his answers.

The parliamentary adage that you never ask a question unless you already know the answer is more than a cynical comment on the ways of politicians. If the whole point of putting a question is to ventilate some issue in public it is rather important to avoid getting a surprise answer which may have the very opposite effect of what was intended. I have watched many occasions where such questions did more harm than good to the questioner's cause and would have been better left unasked.

The rules of procedure will probably prescribe the form questions should take: but the same principles apply as with speeches. Brevity is the chief virtue both in question and answer. This gives the 'cut and thrust' atmosphere to the verbal exchange and also makes for better press reporting. Long, involved questions which no-one quite follows are liable to be demolished by the chilling reply: 'No, Sir!' If supplementary questions are permitted these can be used to

great effect by an experienced debater. The technique is to keep the main question, of which notice has been given, fairly general in character and to hold back for the supplementary the deadly point that was the object of the exercise. This may catch the Chairman out especially if it is very short.

During my time as a Committee Chairman I have often been asked awkward and unexpected supplementary questions, but nearly always the questioner could not bear to limit himself to the minimum words necessary, thus giving me a few precious seconds to think of the right reply. The hardest question of all is, of course, the one word 'Why?'. I have seen it used cleverly with brilliant timing and devastating results.

Petitions

A common technique for bringing local complaints and grievances to the Council's notice is the petition. A Councillor may not necessarily agree with part—or any—of the case made by the petitioners; but he should always accept the request to present it to the Council. Having reasonably assured himself that the signatures are valid he will present it to the Council, usually fairly early in its proceedings, reading out only the nature of the complaint and not the arguments (otherwise there would have to be an immediate debate). The petition is then passed formally by the Mayor or Chairman to the appropriate Committee of the Council to deal with.

It is a useful way of drawing public attention to a local problem, but if publicity is not wanted, there is nothing to prevent a member taking up any issue within the competence of the Council direct with the administration and in fact most cases are dealt with like this. After all, although a thousand signatures on a petition will look impressive, it is

worth noting how many people in the area affected did *not* sign it. This helps to put the petition into perspective.

Council Meetings

The golden rule in Council debating is to speak infrequently, briefly and to the point. A famous parliamentarian once advised a new member on the importance of not addressing the chamber too often: 'They should wonder why you do not speak', he said, 'rather than why you do.'

Observing a debating assembly such as a Council over a period of months will quickly show how attention is focused on the member whose speeches are genuine contributions to debate and not made merely to satisfy an inner desire to express himself on every possible occasion.

All speakers divide into two broad categories: those who speak because they have something to say, and those who speak because they have to say something. Or, to use a more unkind description, the political exhibitionist.

Unlike the formal procedures of the House of Commons, where speeches are mostly prepared interventions largely unrelated to one another, a Council debate is often impromptu and generally more real as a debate on a particular issue. This is because the majority party (or the Committee Chairman in non-party Councils) is generally pleased to get the reports through without opposition and it rests with the minority party, or an individual member objecting to a report, to get a debate going.

In Parliament the daily programme is known in advance, the timetable fixed and the two opening and closing speakers prearranged. A Council debate may well be a complete surprise to many members. So the speeches will be less carefully prepared—and possibly better debating contributions for that reason—and only intelligent guesswork can predict

the course and length of the discussion. Although brevity is widely appreciated, it is nevertheless extremely difficult to achieve. The shorter the time available for a speech the more careful and exact the preparation needs to be.

It is said that an American President, having asked what length was required for the speech he had been invited to make and been told that it was up to him, replied: 'For a five minute speech I want a fortnight to prepare. For fifteen minutes I need two days. And if it's an hour's speech you want, I can start now.'

Timing Your Speech

Most Councils wisely adopt in their Standing Orders a time limit on speeches. In my Borough Council days we were all limited to five minutes with the exception of the budget speech and the Opposition reply to it. If one is used to giving up to an hour's talk to the local party organisation or rate-payers' association, five minutes seems alarmingly short. Yet, provided redundant introductions about being 'pleased to have the opportunity of intervening in this most important discussion, etc. etc.' are ruthlessly cut out, along with any other superfluous verbiage, it is surprising how much one can get across in that time.

The average speaking rate is 110 words a minute although BBC news-readers exceed 200. My own rate is rather higher than average, but I have found it safest to assume 100 words per minute to allow for awkward pauses or interruptions. Broadly speaking, a debater can make only one really good point in five minutes. With sufficient supporting argument, facts and illustrations he can make this compelling listening for his audience while keeping perhaps a minute in hand to demolish some previous speech with a telling figure.

Self-discipline in resisting the temptation to say several things in too short a space of time usually pays off. The impression created on the hearer by a series of undeveloped points unrelated to any single theme will be confusing and the point of the speech may be completely lost. Especially is this so if the Chairman's gavel falls in mid-sentence!

An Irish colleague of mine, however, once outwitted the Mayor by appealing for permission to finish his sentence and, having got it, proceeded to utter the longest single sentence in the history of the Council including, every half-minute or so, the words 'comma', 'semi-colon', and so on. The kind of device only works once, and then probably only if you're Irish.

Where Councils have longer time limits (the GLC is fifteen minutes which I always felt excessive) the tendency is for members to use up all the available time. A reputation for speaking well within the permitted time is worth achieving and it often earns good marks with the Council Chairman. Just as in the Commons where the Speaker decides who shall be called to speak in debate, so the Mayor or Chairman can limit debate by not calling everyone who wants to join in. Being human, he will bear in mind those who can be counted on to speak effectively and briefly.

I once asked the Chairman who had left the chamber for a few minutes (leaving his deputy in the Chair) whether a particular speaker had finished yet. 'Oh, yes' he replied tartly, 'he's finished all right. The trouble is he's still speaking.'

Similar considerations apply to the rules of order. Those who are unaccustomed to public debating procedures may easily step outside what is permissible in debate and the new Councillor should not worry unduly about that. No-one expects him to know it all and, provided he does not make the mistake of arguing with the Chair when ruled out of

order, the practice in these matters will soon become familiar to him.

Apart from specialities such as 'tedious repetition' or 'un-becoming language' such as are to be found in the GLC rules for debate and presumably elsewhere, the most usual error is in not knowing which motion one is speaking to.

Since Councils decide their own rules it would not be sensible to go into detail here on the numerous procedural variations which exist. A careful reading of that section of the Council's Standing Orders dealing with debate will be more useful.

Speaking to the Motion

The main principle involved, and which is common to all standard debating practice, is that there can be only one motion before the meeting at any given time. Since an amendment is also itself a motion, the debates switches from the original motion to the amendment as soon as the amendment has been moved and seconded. Many speakers overlook this and, rising to speak on the amendment, start to refer back to arguments and facts which are relevant only to the motion and not to the amendment at all.

Especially confusing situations develop when several amendments are being moved one after another to the same original motion. When one has watched it in practice, however, the basis of the rule (only one topic of debate at a time) is a patently obvious and commonsense way of avoiding disorder. But even the experienced speaker always needs to keep alert in complicated situations to know which motion is in fact before the Council when he rises to speak.

Moreover, since the Chairman of a Council (particularly if he is a Mayor) has been chosen with his abilities in the wide-ranging ceremonial and social duties uppermost in mind,

it does not follow that he will necessarily be a first-class Chairman at the Council meetings as well. Meetings can quickly get out of hand in these circumstances, and, in the general interests of a Council, indeed of local government, it is poor practice to exploit such weaknesses. The senior members, above all the Council Leader in party-run Councils, should be a tower of strength in upholding the authority of the Chair even if he doubts the wisdom of a particular ruling. But the individual member too has a responsibility to support the Chair.

Raising sham points of order is probably the most irritating habit which develops under a weak Chairman and it ought to earn hearty disapproval from members generally. If every member's speech is constantly interrupted by observations disguised as points of order the democratic process in the Council Chamber would disintegrate. There is no reason therefore why particular members should be allowed to get away with it.

When I was leaving the very first meeting of the Borough Council after my election as a Councillor, a much older colleague who had also just been elected for the first time, said to me: 'The best advice I can give you now is to go away and learn these (pointing to his copy of Standing Orders) by heart.' I never did it, and, judging by his performance as Mayor a few years later, neither did he.

It is quite unnecessary to know these rules and orders by heart. Reading them through quickly to get a general idea of their scope and content is sufficient. Only the section on procedure in debate needs to be well known at the outset. It can be conveniently kept in mind by studying the relevant paragraph whenever a point of order is raised and seeing how the Chairman deals with it.

There is no sense in carrying around in one's head a lot of information which is unlikely to be in constant use and

on which the Chairman or the Town Clerk will advise if a real difficulty occurs. After all, a 'point' of order is in fact not a point at all, but a question addressed to the Chair. And the interpretation of the Chairman is, and clearly must be, final.

6. In the Constituency

CASE-WORK IS A MAJOR CONSUMER of the Councillor's time and one of his most important and rewarding functions. The great majority of cases where the individual and the local authority are in contact will be dealt with by the administration itself. The housing officials are coping daily with letting or allocation problems, the education office with student grants, the welfare department with old people, the mortgage section with loan applications, the planners with requests for planning permission and so on. The man in the street thinks of the Town Hall rather than the Council Chamber when he wants something done. There is nothing surprising about this for the vast majority of cases are routine and settled without difficulty.

The Councillor normally comes in only when something may have gone wrong. An aggrieved or worried citizen seeks him out by writing or calling on him, in the hope, usually as a last resort, that he can bring some pressure to bear. Clearly one has to decide at the outset how to cope with all this so that one does not get swamped with unnecessary detailed work. Whereas for example correspondence can be dealt with in the Councillor's own time during the day; personal calls, often without any appointment, are something not to be encouraged except in emergencies.

The Councillor, who has his living to earn and his own family responsibilities to consider, is giving the bulk of his

spare time to Council work and activities associated with it. He should not be expected to jeopardise either his job or private life for the sake of voluntary public duties. But if he does not plan the case-work aspect of them and tries to be always available to unexpected callers he will soon be overburdened with it and indeed will become less effective as a member because there will be too little time to devote to his principal task of deliberating on policy and taking part in administrative decisions.

Advice Bureaux

The wise practice is to arrange with his colleagues a regular advice bureau at some central and convenient place. These surgeries, in a well-organised form, have become more common as a result of the party system which has developed in local government. It is easier for a party organisation to provide the premises and to arrange for members to work collectively on a rota basis than it is for independents.

Care must be taken to ensure that the Bureau is advertised widely and that it is open to constituents regardless of their party persuasion. Some people will still hesitate to come to the opposing party's headquarters, but their right to do so should always be emphasised.

In areas where a particular issue such as housing forms a large part of the casework it is helpful to have a basic questionnaire which covers all the main facts the member will need to know in taking a matter up with the Council. Careful recording of relevant information, sometimes offered to the Councillor in a hopelessly vague and occasionally in a highly agitated manner, is vital.

Sweeping assertions are frequently made in these private interviews. Allegations against Council officers or neighbours are sometimes heard too and, however unwelcome the

Councillor's apparent coolness may be, it is sound policy to insist on hard evidence of what is said. Where necessary, names should be asked for and hearsay steadfastly ignored.

The request for identification may be met with the answer 'Oh, well, I don't want to get someone into trouble'. That usually means that the allegation is exaggerated and could not stand up to inquiry. It is natural for people who feel unjustly treated (whether they were so treated or not is another matter) to resent the particular official or the whole department they dealt with, and this sometimes leads to accusations of favouritism and even bribery.

I have experienced this situation countless times in advisory work and in doorstep conversation; but have never once been given names and addresses or facts on which an inquiry could be based. No doubt, as in any human organisation, there are black sheep, and there are also ordinary human errors, but it is generally best to dismiss wild allegations unless supported by some nugget of evidence.

If in doubt the Councillor can always ask the complainer whether he has been to the police. This is a good test of how genuine the complaint is. People hesitate before taking a matter to the police station, but are quite capable of having a good grouse at their local Councillor. If a serious complaint is made, it may well be a police matter in any case and the citizen should be advised, where appropriate, to take it to them.

The Chief Executive is the correct officer to whom such criticism, which seems *prima facie* to have something in it, should be referred. In practice most remarks of this kind are made by someone in the heat of the moment, when disappointed by the rejection of a housing application, a mortgage advance or a planning permission. It is just too easy to say 'A neighbour of mine did not have as good a case yet his application was passed. It's all wrong, etc. etc.'

People do not in fact know all the circumstances in another person's case and can quickly jump to a false conclusion.

Anonymous Letters

The same consideration applies to anonymous letters. By and large there is something wrong with a writer if he cannot put his name and address on the letter or at least offer to come and speak privately about the matter. Among the very old, or those who are Council tenants, there may be a real fear of reprisals, however unfounded, but for most people hiding behind anonymity is a confession that they are not on strong ground.

Where Council employees are concerned a different problem arises since they are usually forbidden by the terms of their employment to write to Councillors direct. In practice I have seldom been able to discover anything definite from anonymous letters even if, once in a while, they come from an employee. Almost invariably the letters omit essential information or are generally unclear and, as it is impossible to go to the writer for elucidation, one is unable to take the matter very far.

During my Chairmanship of the GLC Finance Committee, I had a number of unsigned letters alleging irregularities in the GLC's original mortgage scheme. All were promptly investigated, for the Council's own investigators had already discovered irregularities which had caused widespread notice in the press and comment in the courts. But the anonymous letters were always found to be inaccurate. They were probably founded on personal spite, or dislike of new immigrants to the neighbourhood.

Abusive Letters

It was also noticeable that letters of this kind, sometimes

couched in abusive language, followed press coverage on a particular Council service or project. Some people make a habit of writing nasty letters to anyone currently in the public eye and this is a cross which the local Councillor will have to bear from time to time. I learnt from experience that the wastepaper basket is invariably the best place for such communications.

The persistent abusive letter-writer is often not the ogre his unpleasant communications might suggest. A fellow Councillor, with many years of municipal experience, told me how he once received a series of vicious letters from a constituent. Being very new to public life at that time he took them greatly to heart. Eventually he decided to make a personal call on his vociferous critic.

Not being particularly strong in physique he felt just a little ill at ease when knocking on the door in a rather grim street. To his surprise, as the door opened, there appeared a nervous little man, who was completely taken aback when his unexpected visitor introduced himself as the target of the abusive letters. He was so apologetic and inoffensive that the Councillor soon made an excuse and left. He had quickly realised that his mild little man in his sad surroundings was getting an inner satisfaction from writing virulent personal attacks on a public figure. It was a case for psychiatric rather than political treatment.

I found much the same thing in subsequent years. The vicious letter attack may often be outwardly expressing a weak personality or an oppressive domestic life and one should not lose any sleep over it.

Cranks

Cranks are another tedious problem which will afflict a Councillor during the course of his constituency work. The

chief principle is not to assume that because a complaint or point of view is highly unusual it is necessarily that of a crank. It could be valid and should be checked out thoroughly at the beginning. But if the official answers are convincing enough one may have to face the fact that one is dealing with someone who has a fixed idea. However painstaking the explanations and friendly the guidance nothing will shake him from it.

At one time I spent—or rather wasted—valuable hours patiently clarifying and reiterating answers to such people. Eventually I resorted to the practice of sending a short final letter 'I have nothing to add to my previous letters and cannot enter into further correspondence'. I then left it at that, ignoring all future letters. Where supporters of a particular political or religious body flood the Councillor with unwanted letters, publications and even books the only retaliation which seems to work is to post them back to the sender unstamped.

The risk remains that, one day, one may turn away someone who has a legitimate grievance. But it is quite impossible for volunteers to pursue every case to the ultimate limit and one has to be practical about this. The chief duty of the Councillor is to his constituents and the people of his town or district as a whole. He must guard against being distracted too much from this by persistent individuals who have 'bees in their bonnets' rather than fair complaints to make.

Free Advice

Another familiar character at advisory bureaux is the man seeking free professional advice. Some people have an ingrained dislike of paying anyone for advice even on highly complex legal or technical matters. They will go to considerable lengths to read up, for example, the law, on their

case and then engage in long correspondence with anyone in some kind of authority vaguely relevant to their problem rather than see a solicitor and pay for his professional knowledge and skill.

There will be many people who have a genuine need for information or help on matters quite distinct from local government. Pensions and welfare problems are one of the most frequent. One also still gets complaints about hospitals or other services which were once in the local government sphere but are now nationally or regionally administered.

Unless a Councillor happens to be an expert on the subject raised it really is best to refer the constituent to the right place even though people hate being passed on from one authority to another. The fact that they themselves took little or no trouble to find out in the first place where the responsibility lay is, of course, beside the point. It pays to redirect them at once rather than give advice when one is not well versed in the subject.

The complicated system of local government, especially the two-tiered and three-tiered structure of County Councils and Greater London, is not easy for people to follow. Still less is the relationship with those social services allied to them but run by local branches of central ministries. The nationalised service industries like gas and electricity also produce consumer inquiries which come the way of the local Councillor.

An 'advice bureau' is bound to attract all-comers and in many ways the Town Hall itself has a valuable function in helping the local citizen to find his way through the administrative jungle. The GLC central information unit is a good example of a rapid telephone information service which puts callers on to the right department, ministry or other organisation with the minimum loss of time. The telephone number for this service is widely publicised in London, but the size of the capital city does militate against complete success.

Smaller towns could copy the service with a great chance that their citizens will know about it, and I am sure that some of them already do so.

The Councillor too ought to know where people can find out, in one move, the correct place to take their problems. The address of the Citizens' Advice Bureau, if such exists in his neighbourhood, should always be known. The staff who tackle inquiries are trained to handle a wide range of subjects and it is better to pass people on to them and confine oneself to advising on the actual work of the local Council itself.

I know many Councillors who would disagree with this view as being too narrow and restrictive. They may regard themselves as father figures in their home towns or boroughs and give advice on almost any point of difficulty. (I once came across one who was quite thrilled to be advising a constituent on her marriage problems!) My reaction to this is that election to a local Council does not give anyone the right, nor provide him with the knowledge or experience required, to advise other people on all sorts of personal problems regardless of whether they are municipal or not. One can quickly acquire a reputation for being a local busy-body by indulging in this kind of activity instead of being a respected member of the town's governing body.

Bribery and Corruption

The popular fallacy that most Councillors are getting some pecuniary rewards out of their public work dies hard. Once in a while a case of corruption comes to light and is treated to maximum publicity in all the papers. It is big news partly because it is a most serious matter in itself and also, let us not forget, precisely because it is a rare occurrence.

The briefest acquaintance with public administration in

many other countries round the world will confirm that Britain is fortunate in enjoying an almost entirely incorrupt form of government, local as well as national. Just as in industry and commerce business men work on the assumption that over 99 per cent of the public are honest, so, in local government the vast majority of members and officers play the game according to the rules.

Nevertheless, there will be occasions when an approach is made to a member and at the early stage it is not always easy to detect an impropriety. Most business propositions put to Councillors are in themselves above board and the fact that they are made to a member rather than direct to the Department usually indicates nothing more than an ignorance of the system on the part of the business man. I have known situations where people with a proposal to make are quite surprised to be told that, as a Councillor, one does not do the administrative work itself. And a business man like anyone else objects to being referred to another person. It always seems like buck-passing or an inability to see the obviously great possibilities of his scheme. What then should the elected member do when approached in this way?

Above all, he should not agree to meet alone anyone with a business proposition. There should always be at least one officer present. This step is a vital safeguard against any subsequent allegation which might otherwise be made that some improper personal deal took place in private.

If the presence of an officer is in any way frowned upon or objected to, the meeting should not take place and the business man should be advised to write direct to the Council. In no circumstances should a member, in his capacity as a Councillor, be conducting any discussions, still less any negotiations, on business matters connected with his Council without the knowledge of and support of the officers. His correct function is to pass on proposals to the appropriate

department and to get their considered advice. Subsequently if he is not satisfied he can raise the matter in Committee.

The deliberate offer of a bribe is something I have never experienced in twenty years of local government work or even heard of among the many thousands of Councillors I have met during those years. Unfortunately it does happen and certain cases in 1973 and 1974 have caused widespread and justifiable concern. It is worth remembering too that a vigorous two-party system should itself be a valuable safeguard against corruption. The one-party Council is probably more prone to this kind of trouble than one where a live-wire Opposition is performing its watchdog role effectively. Crime invades every part of life and public service cannot expect to be immune from it.

A more common and, in its way, understandable event is the offer of some gift or reward for carrying out, say, a successful piece of casework. While the offer may be entirely genuine, it is also misplaced generosity and only a fool would accept it. People who have, for example, lived in distressing and wretched circumstances for many years and are rehoused as a result of action taken by a Councillor may well feel a strong desire to show their gratitude in some positive form; but they must be reminded, in the nicest possible way, that the Councillor is doing no more than he was elected to do. In casework, success is its own reward.

Outside Activities

Once one is elected to any form of public office demands for performing official functions at social and other gatherings will begin to mount. It is a matter of personal taste whether a new Councillor wants to be involved in presenting prizes at School Speech Days, opening bazaars, proposing toasts after dinner or just sitting on platforms at all kinds of local

events where previously, if he had attended at all, he would have been in the audience.

Some people greatly enjoy these activities and if the occasions can be treated as informally as possible and the inevitable 'few well-chosen words' really are well chosen, local government generally and the Council in particular gain a great deal from it. If not, the image of rather self-important people remote from the rest of us gets another boost.

How much time should be devoted to activities outside the Council work itself but arising from one's position as a Councillor is something on which no general guidance could be given. But unless a fairly firm attitude is adopted to invitations to join other local committees and to take part in activities expected of a Councillor the burden is apt to grow into greater proportions than one anticipated. It is always hard to turn down flattering requests for assistance, but the first duty of an elected member is to the Council, and other organisations, however worthy, should take second place.

I learnt some years ago a useful annual practice which kept my membership of committees of local organisations in reasonable check. As these tend to accumulate with some new responsibilities added and few or none relinquished, I decided positively to resign from two or three committees each year. On Boxing Day (when I also go through all my Bankers Orders to see whether any should be cancelled), I make a list of all the Committees, Clubs and other organisations to which I belong. Having settled on the two or three for which my presence is least essential I write, forthwith, polite letters of resignation. Even so the total commitment to voluntary work always seems to burgeon and without a deliberate policy of annual resignation public life would become impossible for those who still have their living to earn.

7. Paying for it all

THIS BOOK IS NOT THE PLACE for a discussion of all the main local government services, but it is nevertheless important to look briefly at one factor which is common to all of them. They cost money. I have always been surprised at the way the majority of Councillors avoid discussions of local government finance and are shy of joining the finance committee itself. It is too common to hear people say that these matters should be left to the 'financial wizards'—whoever they are.

People imagine that financial policies can only be understood by those with training in accounting or economics or experience in some field of finance such as banking, insurance and stockbroking. Sometimes the reverse is closer to the truth.

Financial policy is fundamentally a question of choosing priorities. It does not mean finding magical ways of raising money for public services, for there are none. The hard choices will always remain what they have always been: commonsense decisions about what to do next and what can be afforded in any given situation.

I do not decry the value of financial experts in local government; but only emphasise that every Councillor can and should play an influential role in determining financial policy. It is not something that can be shrugged off and left to clever accountants to deal with.

Indeed the professional accountant, although invaluable in detailed work on estimates and reports, can easily fail to see the wood for the trees so absorbed does he become in the fascinating analysis of figures. Another Councillor, without the same professional financial know-how may instead have a broader and better judgement on overall financial policy than his highly qualified colleague.

During my time as a Finance Chairman on a Borough Council I once had a chartered accountant as a Vice-Chairman. No one was better than he at spotting inconsistencies in reports. He was particularly useful when we were working on the annual estimates. On the other hand, quite apart from the fact that his work was really overlapping with that of the officers themselves, he was not so effective on matters of broad financial policy which many Councillors would have assumed an expert to be. What therefore should the new Councillor know about the finance of his council? How much swotting up does he need to do?

First he should have a general knowledge of the main principles of the rating system. Since this is the only local government tax, and likely to remain so for some years, its importance can hardly be over-estimated.

Much rating law and practice is exceedingly technical and there is no need for the lay Councillor to master this. The officers are there to advise him on any matters raised by his constituents or which occur in the course of Council and Committee discussions. But he should at least be clear in his mind about the principles on which the rating system works.

In a nutshell rating is an expenditure tax based on the value of accommodation. It is not a form of income tax although it often feels like it. The principle is that the occupiers (not the owners of property) benefit from their occupation and are taxed on the value of what they occupy.

Until recently this principle excluded unoccupied property or vacant sites, but there is now a general rating of unoccupied property. The justification for this is partly that such property does make demands on local services such as fire, police and access to the highway and these have to be paid for. It was also advocated as a means of encouraging owners of empty residential and commercial property to bring their buildings quickly into use. Otherwise they would have to pay a tax without having any rent or other revenue to meet it. Vacant sites remain untouched by rating, but there is a strong body of opinion which argues that they should be brought into the system.

The gross value for rating purposes of residential property is, broadly, a measure of its rental value taking one year with another. After a reduction to allow for the cost of repairs, the remaining net rateable value is the figure used for calculating the rates payable by the occupier.

Rate Poundages

Standard practice is to calculate rates as so many pence in the pound of net rateable value. We are all familiar with the meaning of phrases such as 'a penny on the rates', but this is merely a way of expressing a percentage. A 50p rate is another way of saying a 50 per cent tax on rateable value.

When rates are fixed at budget time, and indeed whenever new expenditure is discussed, this traditional method of measuring costs in terms of its effect on the rates is of rather more than academic importance. It becomes all too easy to say that a favourite project only means a penny on the rates and this sounds little enough. But a penny in the pound can produce several millions for the GLC.

Similarly comparisons between Councils are confused by this system. Increases of, say, a fivepenny rate by two

authorities may represent entirely different percentage increases as well as two vastly different total sums of money.

One has to be wary of comparisons between different Council rates for other reasons too. The range of services provided by Councils varies widely and so does the level of grants received from the Government. A high rate in one town or borough does not necessarily mean that the Council is more profligate than its neighbour where the poundage is lower.

There is also the way in which the proportion of residential, industrial and commercial property varies in each Council area. Obviously, a town with much heavy industry produces a very high revenue from its rate poundage in comparison with the population who use the local services. Similarly, the City of London with its huge concentration of valuable office property and its tiny residential population is immensely wealthy in terms of revenue from rates.

In this case, however, the discrepancy would be so acute between the wealthy centre of London where most people work and the suburban boroughs where they live, that a unique rate equalisation scheme operates. Under this, the wealthier boroughs pass over some of their rate income to the others.

The new Councillor will obviously know what his local rate is and he should make a point of reminding himself about the trend of rate poundages for the previous few years. It is a good plan too to memorise at the outset the local product of a penny rate, i.e., the total sum produced by levying a rate of one penny in the pound.

Every time new projects or new burdens such as pay awards, increased costs or higher interest rates are discussed, he will have readily in mind the effect of these when trans-

lated into the rates which his constituents will ultimately have to pay.

Until recently it was always easy to remember how local government expenditure, taking the country as a whole, was financed. Rates produced about half and Government grants the other half. The tendency has been for Government grants to rise in proportion to rates and this is inevitably followed by growing control from Whitehall on the understandable principle that the man who pays the piper calls the tune. The rates themselves used to divide roughly into two parts: one half coming from householders and the other half being largely paid by industry, shops and offices.

Nowadays however, the domestic ratepayer gets special relief from Government grants which is denied to industry and commerce. Gradually therefore the balance is swinging in favour of the householder.

When Finance Chairmen resort to the old argument that the average ratepayer gets wonderful value for his money (this is usually said when a big rate rise has to be justified) it is as well to remember that the domestic rate by itself probably pays less than a quarter of most Councils' running expenses. The taxpayer, who is only the ratepayer wearing another hat, is finding half the expenditure through Government grants and the non-domestic ratepayers are paying the rest. One should not forget too that we now enjoy the benefits of the huge investments in buildings—schools, houses, roads, drains, sewers, fire stations and so on—made by former generations of ratepayers. As new building is normally financed by loan, which involves committing future generations of ratepayers to repayments of debt, the calculation of what people get in return for their rates is not as simple as it looks. Value for money is a favourite expression when Councillors are debating financial policy, but I wonder sometimes whether it means very much.

Exemption and Relief from Rates

Rating covers almost all forms of property, and there are few reliefs from it and only one major exemption.

The farming community is unique as the only industry which almost entirely escapes rating. Farmlands and buildings are exempt from rating. They are not merely relieved from it, but completely exempt and no valuation of the land is made at all. As a result Councils in predominantly rural areas have to receive heavier government grants to make up the deficiency in their rate incomes. A bad feature of this hidden subsidy (for that is what it really amounts to) is that the more valuable farm benefits the most from exemption. The poorer farm saves less by not having to pay rates, so the subsidy is biased in favour of those who need it least.

Other properties where rates are not levied on the same basis as elsewhere are those owned by the nationalised industries, breweries and Crown lands. Charities get a 50 per cent relief and Councils have discretion to give further help to them in this way.

It is sometimes argued that because industrial and commercial rates are allowable expenditure for tax purposes this in itself constitutes a form of relief. But this is not comparing like with like. Company tax is largely concerned with profits. Rates like salaries, wages, raw materials, rents of factories or offices are a production cost and, if they rise, will reduce by a similar sum the profit which would otherwise be made. So less tax is payable only because there is less profit. Companies pay their full rate assessment like anyone else, and for those firms using large buildings and plant the charge, which is reflected in the price of their goods, can be substantial. Ultimately the consumer pays these rates whenever he buys goods or services.

The advantages of the rating system are seldom given the

publicity which its failings attract. Quite simply they are four. It is simple, certain, independent and cheap.

Evasion

Rates are so easy to collect that evasion is almost impossible. Once property has been valued and the valuation accepted there is simply the annual payment expressed in terms of a poundage which has to be made. One cannot dispute it so long as the Council has gone through the legal process of declaring its rate for the year and has demanded it on the correct rate demand note. Unlike income, which as tax accountants know, is for some people a matter of opinion, property can hardly be concealed. The biggest evasion in income tax is probably the small sums paid in cash which are never declared, but just 'overlooked' when tax forms are filled in for the Inland Revenue. A complaint known in some cynical circles as taxation amnesia.

The same applies to business. While there are areas of flexibility in settling a firm's tax liability under corporation tax or even capital gains tax there can be no doubt about its liability for rates. Rating law is particularly strict and Councils possess powers to 'distrain' on (i.e., seize) people's effects if they do not pay their rates. It is a thoroughly unpleasant thing to do, but much more effective than those interminable wrangles about personal and company tax which absorb vast amounts of professional time.

Reductions in liability for rates can be claimed by showing that the value of the property has been significantly reduced. If, for example, part of a building is destroyed the rateable value will be reduced. More difficult cases are those which arise from some development close by which is considered to reduce property values. These may well result in disagreement between the Inland Revenue valuer and the ratepayer

and will have to be settled by the Local Valuation Committee or ultimately on appeal to the Lands Tribunal.

Before 1948 all valuations for rating were carried out by the local rating authorities themselves. (A rating authority is a Council which raises its rate directly from the ratepayers and not one, like a County Council or the GLC, which levies—or, to use the technical term, precepts—on other Councils.)

While revaluations took place with greater frequency when the work was solely a local responsibility there were obvious disadvantages. One Council might pitch its levels of valuations rather more sympathetically than another. So there would have to be higher poundages to produce enough revenue on the lower valuations. This makes the calculations of various Government grants which take rateable resources into account more difficult. It also rendered useful comparisons between different authorities almost impossible and caused obvious anomalies in the implementation of other legislation such as the Rent Acts which until the 1968 Act relied on pre-war rateable values as yardsticks for restricting rents.

Since 1948 valuation for rating purposes has been carried out by the Inland Revenue department which is quite independent of local government. When an individual ratepayer is contesting the valuation put on his property he is not therefore confronting the Council which gains from a higher assessment although the Council may and probably will intervene in the case and oppose any reduction. The final decision is (subject to the appeals procedure), that of a government department.

Unfortunately only three general revaluations have taken place since 1934, instead of every five years as originally envisaged in the 1925 Rating Act. Revaluations have taken place in 1956, 1963 and 1973. Some appeals against

the 1963 revaluation were still outstanding ten years later.

The worst result of postponing revaluations is that when they eventually take place the adjustments in rateable values are so sharp and the principles of the poundage system so little understood that acute public dismay is always aroused. Reaction to changes in rates is for some psychological reason more violent than to new taxes. Hence the saying that people pay their taxes in sorrow and their rates in anger. Which is presumably the reason why Governments have so frequently in the past funk'd the task of revaluation. If it were not for the expense involved a strong case could be made for three-year revaluations.

The only method of rates evasion which exists in practice is that of concealing improvements to a building. Central heating installations may for instance go unnoticed in a private home. Strictly speaking they should be notified and if substantial enough (provided they are a fixed part of the property) will increase the assessment. People who manage to hide these improvements for a while are often surprised to find when they are discovered that the Council can claim back payments from the date of the installation. Which can mean a nasty bill.

Garages and extensions also cost more in higher rates, but here there will be a planning permission requirement in any event so the Council will know of the work taking place. Naturally the Planning department will notify the Treasurer who will inform the Inland Revenue and in due course a notice of re-assessment will arrive.

These increases in rates following the improvement of property always trigger off the keenest resentment among people and it has to be admitted that a tax which discourages improvement is open to criticism. Although I doubt if anyone decides not to build a garage or install central

heating just because his annual rates will go up a pound or two, the irritation caused by the system, to say nothing of the extra administration involved, hardly justifies it. Proposals are now under consideration by which improvements between revaluations would be ignored. Account will eventually be taken of them at each general revaluation—assuming of course that there is one.

Certainty of Collection

The certainty of rate collection is not something the public is aware of as a direct benefit although it does make administration and budgeting very much easier.

When the Finance Chairman is preparing his budget he has to forecast the income for the year ahead as well as proposing the expenditure. If he can be sure what a particular rate in the pound will produce he can budget with some degree of accuracy. Unlike the Chancellor of the Exchequer who has to cope with a range of taxes where the revenue may be difficult to calculate precisely he is dealing in essentially immovable things: property and fixed plant or machinery. Even if there is some substantial new building going on in the town he will know when it is likely to be finished and to come into the rating net.

Actually the revenue from rating valuation seems to rise in London about 1.3 per cent a year so a Council can count on this extra revenue even if the rate remains unchanged. Personal incomes tend to rise faster than this owing to inflation so the extra money taken by the Chancellor without increasing income tax levels at all is rather greater than the natural rise in rate revenue. As the economists would put it, rating is not a buoyant tax. If much more money is required from it, the poundage just has to be raised.

Independent Source of Revenue

The independence of rates from control by the Central Government is far more important than is generally supposed. It is the only large source of revenue entirely within the discretion of a local Council. The Government will control local expenditure in a variety of ways and, as we have seen, can try to use its controls on Council borrowing to force an authority to bend in a particular direction. But, as in that case of the Borough dustmen described in Chapter 4, the existence of a wholly independent source of revenue was the deciding factor. Power in local government, as in all forms of democratic government, is closely allied to money. If local government ever lost its right to raise its own money from local people for local services Councils would possess only the semblance and not the substance of power.

Cheap Administration

Rates are very cheap to collect. This is due to the difficulty of evasion and the simple (at least in principle) method of demanding the rate. It is a strong feature of this ancient tax, which dates from 1601, that very little of the public money raised by it is spent on the collection process itself. Unlike the ill-fated land tax of Lloyd George which brought in rather less than it cost to administer!

So that is the case for the defence. What is there to be said against rates as a form of taxation? The most usual accusation is that rates unlike income tax are not levied according to ability to pay. The extreme example is that of the retired person living next door to a family with grown up children. Both houses are similar in size and enjoy the same local position and amenities. The rates are the same in each case, yet in the first house one pension has to meet them while in

the second there may be three or four incomes possibly quite large, available to pay the rate demand. In short rates are regressive, i.e., they bear more heavily on people with lower incomes than those who are better off. This is because there is an irreducible minimum of accommodation for most people however small their income, but as income rises accommodation is not improved in equal steps with it. After a certain point the extra money will be spent on other things instead of a larger and more opulent house. So the proportion which rates tends to bear to total income gradually falls the higher the income range.

Rate Rebates

To some extent this has been mitigated by the introduction of a rate rebate scheme which helps people on low incomes. But the basic bias of rating is still there and in some ways is inherent in the nature of a property tax. On the other hand most taxes other than income tax are also regressive. All taxes on expenditure are likely to be regressive in effect and there is no reason why rating should be singled out for criticism in this respect. The tax system taken as a whole is slightly progressive in character (i.e., the higher income groups pay a greater proportion of total income if all taxes taken together than the lower income groups do) and rating has to be seen in this general context.

Psychologically, the direct payment of rates often in large twice yearly sums, is the greatest cause of irritation. Like rent and fare increases it is inescapable and paid out of income which has already been taxed. Income tax would be under far more severe attack if it too had to be paid in two large sums each year following a demand note from the Inland Revenue, instead of being deducted at source by the employer. The statutory right to pay rates by instalments

has relieved some of the harshness of heavy lump sum payments and complaining ratepayers who have not taken advantage of this should be advised to do so. It can usually be done by banker's order too.

The other most serious criticism of the rating system is that it lacks buoyancy as a revenue raiser and is inappropriate as a means of getting money for expanding services like education, roads, police and welfare. There is much force in this argument and the growth in government grants is undoubtedly due to the inability of rates to produce enough money to finance these rapidly extending services without causing unacceptable hardships among ratepayers. Until governments are prepared to grant local government some other sources of revenue such as house purchase duty, land development tax, capital gains tax on property, or the Road Fund licence revenue or petrol duty there will always be a shift towards more direct grants from the Government with the political strings that invariably attach to such aid.

Budgeting Policies

Rates—the income of local government—have been considered in some detail because they are the most sensitive point of contact between citizen and Councillor. But nowadays the method by which the expenditure is worked out has also become a subject of growing public interest.

The old-style Council budgeting process consisted of putting together estimates from the committees, calling for last minute cuts if the total seemed too appalling to contemplate, adding suitable figures for contingencies, taking as much as possible from the balance left from the year just ending, and then doing the rate poundage arithmetic to arrive at the final rate in the pound which would produce the necessary revenue for the year.

The trouble with such a system is that it leaves the Policy and Resources Committee so little room to manoeuvre. The estimates have already been prepared in detail and passed their respective committees. At that stage no absolute limit on expenditure has been settled and the individual committee has to decide between what is essential and what is only desirable. These are matters open to widely divergent interpretation. Indeed every Committee tends to include a fair number of enthusiasts for the particular service it is running and their view of what is essential may not correspond with that of other members of the Council or with what is a practicable increase in the demands on the public purse. Only the Policy and Resources Committee and ultimately the whole Council can take an overall view of the services as a whole, and in practice, especially where large authorities are concerned, the Council Meeting is far too late in the day for effective action. Even the Policy and Resources Committee will be in some difficulty when it feels that reductions in proposed expenditure are necessary. Its members may not have the experience of particular services to know what to cut. So the not infrequent practice is to ask for a percentage off all estimates or some equally crude device.

Officers preparing estimates, and to some extent the spending Committees too, are all too well aware of this likelihood and estimates may well contain some fat which is there as a sacrificial offering to the Policy and Resources Committee. But this does not reach the heart of the problem which is how much in any given year the local ratepayer can reasonably be expected to find for his local services.

Modern methods of budgeting have attempted to solve this dilemma by bringing the Policy and Resources Committee in at the start of the process, i.e., before any Committees have even looked at preliminary estimates. A fixed

total budget is proposed together with a division between each Committee of the Council. Once this has been agreed to, after the traditional haggling between Committee Chairmen the Committee estimates have to be prepared to fit into this predetermined total.

By forcing a Committee, and its appropriate officers, to keep within a pre-set target, this system produces a more realistic order of priorities. Instead of vague assessments about the relative necessity of desirable projects, there is a fixed standard against which these projects have to be measured. The quart cannot be got into the pint pot, so all proposals have to compete against each other for a place in the limited total available to each Committee.

In short there are series of Committee budgets instead of estimates. At the end of the day the Policy and Resources Chairman has a spending requirement the size of which he knew many months earlier and his final budget will be a planned and orderly affair rather than a last minute hotch potch of unrelated estimates probably marred by hasty and ill-judged economies.

His task will nevertheless remain arduous and thankless. Without wishing to appear cynical, I have to record my impression, confirmed over many years, that the public want better services but do not wish to pay for them. Anyone can immediately suggest items of expenditure which should be slashed; but people, Councillors included, seldom propose cuts in those services in which they have a special interest or from which they benefit.

How often do we hear calls for economy in education from parents with school-age children, demands by motorists for less money to be allocated to roads, or proposals by Council tenants for reductions in subsidies? Yet none of them want the rates to go up. The cruel dilemma facing the Policy and Resources Chairman is that everyone demands general

economy and wants particular expenditure. Councillors who are determined to get savings in the budget should always be asked to suggest suitably large cuts in the services which are their own special favourites. One may not be successful, but at least it imparts a spirit of realism to the discussion!

Councillors need to watch out that economies once made are not promptly absorbed by new spending within the department concerned. Officials dislike sudden gaps in their budgets as instinctively as nature abhors a vacuum. Unless the estimate where the saving has been made is immediately reduced one will find that some new item has come along to replace it. We had to be particularly sharp on this at the GLC when the first savings from organisation and methods techniques began to materialise. Instead of actual cash reductions one suddenly discovered that standards had been improved and the saving largely mopped up. The fundamental reason for this is not of course some malevolent instinct among officers, but the natural desire to keep improving the services offered to the public.

A good officer is proud of his organisation and the public work it performs. He will seize every opportunity to make it better and, if he is not nearing the end of his professional career, his own very proper ambition to show that he presides over a go-ahead department with first class services will play a part in his anxiety to preserve his budget from too much mutilation by economy-minded Treasurers and Policy and Resources Committees.

There are not great reputations to be made by officers in a spending department showing economies. For this is a negative concept. A splendid new public library or civic centre is by contrast a visible monument to his success. If it were not for the drive and determination of teams of keen officers a great many fine projects would never get off the ground at all, but the Councillor is nevertheless elected to

represent those who have to pay for it all, and he should not allow empire building for its own sake or for the greater glory of a particular Chief Officer.

Capital programmes of schools, houses, roads and so on today stretch out ahead as far as the eye can see, and local government merits the accolade of the empire on which the concrete never sets. Every saving which can be achieved, however, should be passed on to ratepayers unless there is a convincing reason why some new project should replace it. The money does not belong to the Council to spend in a new way, if it is no longer needed for the purpose for which it was originally collected. There is always a contingency provision or a development reserve for unexpected commitments and the ordinary estimates as far as possible should not be used too readily for financing schemes not originally included in them. Such projects should wait a year and be properly assessed against all the other alternatives when the next Budget is being prepared.

Economy practised for its own sake is a two-edged policy. All too easily it can be a blunder which generates higher expenditure in the long run. When I first became a Finance Chairman I discovered that my predecessor, who was considerably more than twice my age and obviously from the old school of local government finance, had cut so much from the maintenance estimates on the public libraries, baths and the Town Hall itself that the fabric of the building had deteriorated. We were then faced with heavy bills for repairs which, if proper maintenance had been carried out would have been avoided. It was false economy to insist on one coat of paint instead of three. That was a lesson I never forgot.

Professor Northcote Parkinson tells a famous story of an imaginary Council where the members pass a huge estimate for a great capital project in a minute or so, because no-one really understands it, and then spend an hour debating the

cost of repainting a garden shed which is within everyone's comprehension. Unfortunately this attitude to expenditure is more real than might be supposed. I have myself experienced a Party meeting at which a new swimming pool costing half-a-million pounds went through without discussion since no-one could say what a swimming pool should cost anyway. The following hour and a half was spent in a heated dispute about the price of tea in the members' canteen and the hours at which tea service ended.

In some respects this problem is inherent in any democratic arrangement since most people elected to a Council will not have had any previous experience in deciding matters involving vast sums of money. The small items are pounced upon because they are within the personal knowledge of people. The old Scottish proverb 'many a mickle makes a muckle' is often quoted to support the thesis that attention to small matters is the true art of economy. Look after the pennies and the pound will take care of itself, is another version of the same argument.

The trouble is that in large-scale organisations this is often a false premise. A single decision on, say, whether one builds a bridge over a river or a tunnel underneath it may involve a difference of millions of pounds. Thousands of minor economies could not match the same saving. Ideally, economy should be practised in all matters of public spending, but the common tendency is to shy away from the big policy issues, just because they are big, and to fuss about the minutiae of committee estimates.

This chapter began with an exhortation to Councillors not to leave finance to the so-called experts. The last few points might well put off the new member from attempting to intervene in the big decisions, and to wait until he has served more years on the Council. There is no need to adopt such a passive role as this. It is vital that Committee Chair-

men are closely cross-examined by their colleagues on the financial implications of all their schemes and policies and even the most entrenched of them. There should be no sacred cows. And characteristically the toughest challenge to them will probably come from the new member who is not afraid to ask all over again the basic questions which the veteran Councillor may have long since forgotten.

8. Organisations for Councillors

GENERALLY SPEAKING a Councillor will not come into contact with local government organisations outside his Council. Of course, if he is a member of the Establishment Committee he may find himself sitting at trade union negotiations on behalf of his Council which is likely to be a big employer and he will be facing the representatives of say NALGO or the TGWU or the NUT and so on. But just as the hundreds of different kinds and grades of employees in the local government service have their representative organisation, so the Councillor has his.

The principal bodies are in effect trade unions for particular kinds of local authorities. They are the Association of County Councils, the Association of Metropolitan Authorities, the District Councils Association and the London Boroughs Association. The GLC is a representative body in its own right as the LCC was before it. Some of the associations have set up joint bodies. For example the ACC and the AMA have established a Central Council of Local Education Authorities to specialise in this area. The Association of Education Committees (AEC) still remains in being however at the time of writing.

The membership of each of these bodies is not that of individual Councillors but the Councils themselves. Each one sends representatives to the meetings of its appropriate

organisation. They will elect Committees of the Association who do most of the work. The job of representing a Council on the ACC or the AMA for example should normally go to the most senior members of each Council; but it has to be admitted that functions of this kind are sometimes passed on to anyone who has the time to give to it. The local authority Associations are created for two main purposes. Firstly, they pool the knowledge and experience of all their members and can give valuable advice to councils as new problems arise from time to time.

Secondly, they put to the Government the views of their members on all matters involving the central Government and local authorities. As part of this process they will be especially interested in legislation going through Parliament which affects local government. There are constant meetings between Government Ministers whose departments are involved in local government affairs such as the Departments of Education, the Environment, the Home Office and the Treasury. The two sides by no means always agree, which is healthy for an independently elected system of local democracy. It would be a bad day for democracy in Britain if local Councils always accepted what suited the Government of the day.

A similar body to those already discussed is the Association of Education Committees. It acts in much the same way, but deals only with education matters and comes into prominence when negotiations on teachers' salaries are under way. The AEC is the employers' body even though the Government pays more than half the bill.

Individual Councillors have not been so well catered for. There is a relatively small but active body called the Association of Councillors which holds regular conferences and courses on matters of interest to elected members. Courses open to Councillors are also held by the Royal Institute of Public Administration.

Internationally there are two principal organisations in which Councillors may play a part.

International Union of Local Authorities (IULA)

Established in 1913, the headquarters of the International Union of Local Authorities are at The Hague. Local authorities from over sixty countries are members, only those from the Eastern bloc being ineligible, as IULA is a non-political body. Its aims are four-fold :

1. To promote the cause of local autonomy;
2. To raise the standards of local administration;
3. To study all questions concerning local government and the welfare of citizens; and
4. To foster the participation of people in civic affairs.

IULA is governed by a General Council, on which the UK has ten seats, and which meets every two years.

The British Section of IULA was founded in 1925, and includes local authorities of all kinds in Great Britain. It holds a national conference every two years, alternating with the International Congress.

The Council of European Municipalities

The Council of European Municipalities was founded in 1951, with these objectives :

1. To defend the autonomy of local authorities;
2. To improve the administration of the municipalities, ensure their liberties, and contribute to their prosperity, particularly by the development of inter-municipal relations and activities;
3. To develop the European spirit within the municipalities in order to advance European unity, based on the autonomy of local authorities; and

4. To ensure the participation by local authorities in the work of the European and international organisations.

Its membership is from Western Europe and in most countries the local authorities are members as such. In others, including Britain, membership is on an individual basis. National sections exist in all the Common Market countries plus Austria and Switzerland. The British Section was established in 1957. It is likely to play a bigger role in the future as Britain's links with the Continent of Europe grow in the nineteen-seventies. Already it has assisted in many 'town-twinning' arrangements between British and continental towns and this practice too is becoming more common. There is a great deal to be learnt about local government by seeing how other countries, especially those with a similar culture and historical background, handle their social and economic affairs.

International conferences, however, can be tedious affairs. It is always difficult to run a great gathering of thousands of delegates whose national traditions of debate and speech-making differ enormously. But as in conferences at home the main benefit is derived from the personal meetings which take place and the friendship acquired. And if one has the time to read all the paperwork, some of it will convey information which might be useful in the daily task back at the town hall.

The political parties have developed their own specialised conferences for party members and these take place every year. Debate tends to be on subjects with a strong political flavour such as housing, finance, education and local government reform.

Obtaining Information

The Councillor who wants information on some aspect of his

work will turn to the officers of his own Council in the first instance for it is part of their job to give him all possible aid and advice. They will themselves refer to the local authority associations or to their own professional bodies for material not immediately available in their own offices. For example, the Treasurers are members of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy which, in addition to being an examining and professional body, publishes valuable reference works especially in the field of comparative statistics.

There is no need for the lay Councillor to do his own devilling for figures. Provided his request for information is not unreasonable in relation to the purpose for which it is required, and the staff time likely to be needed to comply with it, the officers should do this for him. Where, however, the information is clearly party political in character it would be improper to ask officers to work on it, and they will be right to decline to do so.

The correct course here is to contact the Research Departments or Local Government sections of one's political party. They are there to help party members in the local government field as well as MPs. The parties also produce a large number of publications including pamphlets, speaker's notes, news letters and election handbooks and these can save the actively partisan Councillor a lot of time in preparing his speeches in and out of the Council Chamber. Such material, however, needs to be treated with care since it is written nationally and may not suit the special local situation with which a Councillor is concerned.

Whatever one's loyalty to a national party organisation there is no point in following slavishly the line adopted by its central research departments. Moreover their staff are not necessarily experienced in the practice of local government and cannot be expected to know intimately, still less advise

how to handle, any local situation even if it is highly explosive and political in character.

The Local Government Information Office was set up by the local authority associations primarily to try and correct the poor image of local government and especially the unfavourable view of it which they felt the national press were taking. Undoubtedly it has done good work, but from the individual Councillor's point of view it is more of a general public relations exercise for local government, dealing mostly with press enquiries, rather than a source of information, as its name might suggest, for the public generally.

The Local Government Press

As the conscientious Councillor is already coping with a mass of reading matter he will probably not want to read too many publications as well. But the local government magazines should be looked at especially for those subjects in which the Councillor has chosen to specialise.

The *Local Government Chronicle* appears weekly and always devotes some articles to matters which interest elected members as well as giving thorough coverage of local government issues for the officers among its readers. A subscription to this journal will be a sound investment for the newly-elected Councillor.

Other important periodicals include the *Municipal Review*, the monthly organ of the AMA and the weekly *Municipal Journal*. Members of Education Committees will want to take *Education*, the magazine of the AEC, and Finance enthusiasts will benefit from reading *Local Government Finance* published by the CIPFA. There are also publications far too numerous to mention, covering housing, welfare, planning and so on.

Of the weekly papers in the general political arena two

give a considerable degree of space to local government affairs, *The Economist* (by no means as dull and technical as its name implies) and *New Society*. Obviously one cannot read all the material available, but it is a good plan to take one of the local government magazines and to use the Members' Library or Reading Room, which most Council offices nowadays provide, to study or look through the other papers. And if such services are not made available to members they should be. It is a perfectly proper and reasonable expenditure of ratepayers' money to provide them.

Copies of important Government White Papers, Royal Commission Reports and similar official documents together with professional publications relating to local government and major reports and surveys by independent organisations like Political and Economic Planning should be readily available for the Councillor to peruse whenever he wishes.

Using the Public Library

Finally one should not overlook the local public library organisation and in particular the Chief Librarian and his senior staff. They are professionally trained to advise on sources of information and statistical reference and will always be immensely helpful to a member of the Council who wants to study a particular issue.

When I was preparing my case for a GLC Lottery the Librarian provided me and other members interested with a bibliography of all the important books and reports written on the history of public lotteries in Britain since the first occasion in 1569. The subsequent debate in the Council in 1968 was one of the most informed and absorbing of that year and ultimately led to a Bill being introduced in Parliament. The fact that it was killed by the House of Lords is of little consequence. As this book has sought to show, new

ventures in local politics take a long time and much patience and persistence to carry right through the governmental maze. But if some eventually succeed the effort is surely worthwhile.

Nowadays there is a growing practice among the larger authorities to provide essential information, as well as secretarial, services to Councillors. In some cases this is reserved to Chairmen of Committees, but elsewhere it has extended even to helping members with research work in their own wards or constituencies. For example, some Councils automatically provide members with all research data relevant to their area. Once again this is a departure from former practice which is largely dictated by the increasing size of the areas represented (or, looked at another way, by the drastically reduced number of Councillors now running the new system compared to the old) and also by modern views of the role of the elected member. If, as we have seen, he is not only part of the corporate planning process, providing the key element of political skill and experience, but also a communicator, he will need a continual supply of up-dated information on social and economic trends in his own electoral district.

Some members always remain communicators of current public disquiet or complaint to the Council. Others become exponents to the public of the Council's view. The ideal obviously is to represent the Council in the constituency and the constituency in the Council. In the past it has been easier to do the latter, but as the governmental problems grow and community politics at the grass roots becomes better organised and more successful the Councillor who wants to remain on top of his job must demand and get all the research and information he reasonably needs to carry out the communicator's function. This activity cannot be left to the officers. By training, instinct and tradition they are

not generally suited to it. This is a politician's field of action. Those who persist in clinging to the strictly 'amateur' view of political life will find themselves ill-equipped to face the crises which blow up from time to time and which in recent years have led to a decline in public respect for democratic institutions.

The local politician will probably become steadily more professional and less amateur in his approach to public work. This movement in attitude to the more demanding position he now holds will not necessarily harm the quality of local government nor blunt its sensitivity to opinion. On the contrary it is a welcome trend which should lead over the years to a measurable improvement in service to the public.

Index

- Acts of Parliament 25
- advice bureaux 95, 99-101
- agenda 16, 17, 32, 76, 79, 80, 83
- Aldermen 20, 73, 82
- Association of Councillors 125
- Association of County Councils 124, 125
- Association of Education Committees 124, 125, 129
- Association of Metropolitan Authorities 124, 129
- 'Bains Report' (*The New Local Authorities: Management and Structure*) 29
- Bevin, Ernest 61
- Borough Council 18, 40, 89, 92
- bribery 101-103
- briefing for meetings 16
- British Broadcasting Corporation 89
- Budget Meeting 48
- bureaucracy 9, 40, 77
- 'call-over' 32
- case-work 94, 95
- Central Council of Local Education Authorities 124
- Chairman (of a Committee) 32-35, 50, 74, 76, 80, 81, 85, 87, 88, 119, 122, 131
- Chairman (of the Council) 20-24, 85-87, 90-93
- 'Chairman's Action' 27, 32, 33
- Chairmanship 21
- Chancellor of the Exchequer 114
- Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy 128, 129
- Chief Executive Officer 35, 38, 96
- Churchill, Sir Winston 69

- Citizens' Advice Bureau 101
 City of London 20, 108
 City Manager 24
 Civil Service 26, 40, 60
 Clerk (of a rural district council) 84, 85
 Clerk's Department 79
 Council of European Municipalities 126
 County Borough 17, 54
 County Council 17, 54, 100, 112
 Crown 26, 40, 110

 democracy 9-11, 27, 36, 38, 40, 69, 73, 92
 Department of Education 125
 Department of the Environment 73, 125
 Directors General 38
 District Council 17
 District Councils Association 124

Economist, The 130
 education 19, 94, 127, 129
 Educational Television Service 41-44
 'embargo' 59
 Environmental Planning 19
 Establishment Committee 124

 Finance Chairman (of a borough) 47, 72, 106, 114, 121
 Finance Committee 76
 finance, local government 17, 66, 105-123, 127

 General Post Office 40
 Greater London Council 5, 12, 31, 33, 42, 43, 50, 52, 54, 65, 83, 84, 90, 91, 97, 107, 112, 120
 central information unit 100
 election 12
 Finance Chairman 33, 35, 40, 97
 Fire Stations 33
 Lottery 130
 Road Engineers 42
 Traffic Committee 41
 Gresham's Law 62

 Home Office 125
 House of Commons 84, 85, 88, 89
 House of Lords 86, 130
 housing 14, 19, 94, 127

 income tax 111, 116
 Inland Revenue 111-113
 Inner London Education Authority 40-43
 International Union of Local Authorities 126
 interviews 37

 land tax 115
 law 10, 24, 25, 30

- Leader (of the Council)
 22-24, 51, 74, 92
 Leadership 22
 libraries 130
 Lloyd George, David 115
Local Government Chronicle
 129
Local Government Finance
 129
 Local Government
 Information Office 129
 London Boroughs Association
 124
 London County Council
 13, 22, 23, 64, 65, 124

 management 31, 36
 'Matters of Urgency' 80
 Maud Report 25, 29, 65, 82
 Mayor 18, 20-24, 47, 87,
 90-92
 Minutes 17
 Morrison, Herbert 22
 Municipal Corporations Act,
 1835 64
Municipal Journal 129
 Municipal Reformers 64
Municipal Review 129

 National and Local
 Government Officers
 Association 124
 National Union of Teachers
 124
*New Local Authorities:
 Management and
 Structure, The* ('Bains
 Report') 29
New Society 130
 'non-attributable' 56-58

 'off the record' 56, 57
 officers (of the Council) 10,
 16, 26-28, 30-44,
 77-79, 95, 102, 106, 118,
 120, 128
 officialese 18, 50

 paper work 16, 76
 Parkinson, Northcote 121
 Parliament 24-26, 49, 60,
 61, 84, 88, 130
 party whip 22
 petitions 87, 88
 policy 15, 19, 23, 29-31,
 118-120
 Policy and Resources
 Committee 19, 23, 83,
 118-120
 Political and Economic
 Planning 130
 politics 11, 12, 61-75, 81
 press
 local 18, 45, 47, 51, 53,
 54, 59, 60, 62
 local government 129,
 130
 national 47, 51, 52, 55,
 59, 60, 62
 relations with the 45-50
 Press Council 62
 press releases 58, 59
 Prime Minister 23

publicity (personal) 49-54
Public Relations Department
17

Question Time 85

radio 54-56

Ratepayer Association 71

ratepayers 27, 79, 117, 121

rates 15, 17, 106-117

Rating Act, 1925 112

'red tape' 27

redundancy 39

Rent Acts 112

rents 14

reorganisation 55, 127

Research Department 128

resources 19, 83, 118-120

Road Safety Committee 54

Royal Commission Reports
130

Royal Institute of Public
Administration 125

role, Councillor's 14

School Management Board
69

speaking rate 89

Standing Orders (of the
Council) 23, 32, 79,
83, 89, 91, 92

Strategic Planning 19

taxation 15, 106, 111

television 41, 42, 54-56, 61

termination (of an
appointment) 38

'totting' 72, 73

Town Clerk 36, 72-74, 93

Town Hall 18, 21, 71, 75,
83, 94, 100, 121

'town-twinning' 127

trade unions 124

Transport and General
Workers' Union 124

Treasurer 113, 120, 128

Treasury 125

ultra vires 25

welfare 94, 100

Westminster 70, 71, 75

Whitehall 15, 60, 71, 74,
75

White Papers 130



